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Subcontracted Further Education in England:
A Case Study of a Private Provider

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Abstract

Further Education (FE) is under-researched and not well understood, but subcontracted FE is virtually invisible, despite being a significant part of the sector: subcontracting accounted for around £800m, or 8% of the national FE spend, in 2016/17. This study gives voice to managers inside a subcontracted private provider, a near-silent part of the turbulent FE sector.

In the early 1990's, Kirsten established Midvotech, a private Further Education provider subcontracted to a local college. Years later, Midvotech was part of a thriving group of businesses; Kirsten was MD and I was leading the education provision and was generously allowed privileged access to my workplace as a research site. This is the account of the revelatory case study of Midvotech, inflected by my somewhat contradictory leader-insider-researcher status.

Data was collected between 2013 and 2017 and managers cast Midvotech as a highly contradictory, agile, and fast-paced organisation. Midvotech had high expectations of them, but they were permitted high levels of agency as managers. Both organisational agility and individuals' agency were positive manifestations of the "terrors" of neoliberal performativity, a term used by an educational theorist who exemplified a policy view of the educational landscape and was highly critical of privatisation in education, Stephen Ball.

Challenging the dominant policy view of FE, the philosophy of Alain Badiou is employed to re-explore Midvotech. Rooted in an intuition early in the research, the lens of Badiou provokes new ways of thinking Midvotech's contradictions. Governance and power relationships are illuminated by re-casting Kirsten and those around her as Badiouian subjects.

Although Midvotech is an outlier, its inclusion in FE enriches a sector best defined by the difference it incorporates. Following this argument, the contribution of the Midvotech study serves to inform a more positive potential future for FE.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The practice of outsourcing FE provision has been increasingly common since the early 1990s and in 2016/17 accounted for a significant part of the sector; estimated at around £800m, or 8%, of FE funding. In spite of this relative significance, subcontracted FE is almost entirely absent from the academic literature.

A subcontracting arrangement allows a private organisation to access public funding through a lead provider, which levies a management fee, usually around 20% of the funded amount. The arrangement allows lead providers to respond to local needs or to offer specialist provision which would not be viable to resource themselves, especially considering the market risks and contingencies inherent in more niche provision.

Midvotech was the FE part of a private vocational education provider delivering full-time programmes in Media Technologies in Further and Higher Education (HE), and between 2013 and 2017, Midvotech was the site for a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) research project, illuminating a particular subcontracted private FE provider in England.

In many respects Midvotech is an unusual case. It is a significant part of the local FE landscape, unlike much subcontracted provision. Between 2013 and 2017, the lead provider for Midvotech was a local general FE college (GFEC), itself clearly committed to partnership work, evidenced historically by its status as third largest 16-19 FE subcontractor in England in 2011/12, out of the 582 listed. Midvotech's contract was unusually large; even before the research period, ranking 35 out of the 2,672 subcontractors listed in the 2011/12 public record of subcontracting in FE, in terms of size of contract.

During the research period there were two local GFECs, including the lead provider college. Whilst Midvotech comprised all of the Media Technologies provision offered by the lead provider, there was a roughly similarly-sized Media Technologies provision offered by the second GFEC. Apart from sixth-form options, more often comparatively smaller and not as well-resourced technologically, there were therefore two main options in the Media Technologies subject area for school-leavers in the local area; Midvotech or the competing GFEC.

Midvotech was funded through a £multi-million subcontracting relationship with its lead provider to deliver full-time vocational programmes to post-16 students in the Media Technologies subject area, predominantly BTEC, across all FE levels, 1 to 3. Around one third of learners were categorised as 'widening participation', measured by a postcode deprivation index, and the positive contribution to the community was widely recognised. Midvotech enjoyed a good reputation, including media interest and high-profile visits from a member of the royal family, high-ranking cabinet ministers and more local VIPs.

The provision was unusually large for a subcontracted relationship of its type because it comprised of predominantly 16-19 study programmes. Midvotech recruited mainly 16-18-year-old learners onto full-time programmes, at a time when it was more usual for college partnerships to offer less delivery-intensive post-18 programmes, such as apprenticeships. Midvotech had a vanishingly small apprenticeship provision, with less than 10 learners each year. The Midvotech provision was therefore more similar to a department inside a college than was usual for subcontracted provision. This was testament to the close and productive relationship with the lead provider.

After a period of rapid growth just prior to the research period, intake had stabilised and Midvotech enrolled around 1,000 FE learners each year. Around 80% of learners were on 2-year programmes at level 3 and over three-quarters of the remaining 20% were on 1-year level 2 programmes. GCSE English and maths were part of the programme for learners who were yet to achieve their A*-C grades. Three main subject areas divided each year group roughly three ways, into Music Technology or Music Performance; Games Technology or Games Art; and TV, Film or other Visual Technologies. The small remainder of the provision was at level 1, a general programme covering all three subject areas alongside Functional Skills qualifications.

Midvotech was established in the early 1990's, not long after college incorporation, explained later, and had therefore successfully navigated the choppiest waters in the history of FE. Unusually and in contrast to FE colleges, many of which were consolidating through merger, Midvotech had grown year on year. Relative security had been achieved through diversification of the education provision. In addition to FE, HE programmes were offered in

partnership with a local university and Media Technologies courses were delivered by Midvotech in local schools. Many learners chose to progress from level 3 onto HE courses at Midvotech, so the business model rested on a high-volume pipeline across all levels, FE and HE, attractive to local learners in FE and nationally in HE. The strategy of diversification had established other businesses, defining a yet wider body which included the education arm. Amongst others, the group of businesses included a film company, record company and business hub, enabling mutually beneficial links between education and industry.

Visitors often remark on how little like a college Midvotech appears. Their first impression is more of a plush media editing facility than an FE provider. The style is bold and sophisticated. Despite recruiting around 1,000 FE learners each year, Midvotech intentionally aims to avoid any suggestion of an institutional setting. The aesthetic is more work-like, with most delivery taking place in specialist spaces; there are very few standard classrooms, generally reserved for the English and maths provision. Differences from an FE college environment are deliberate, marking out the alternative nature of Midvotech as much as possible. This ethos infuses the education and training as well as the environment. Differences in the management structure as well as the synergistic relationship with the wider group enables Midvotech to be very highly responsive. One example of many to support this claim was at the beginning of a year of especially good recruitment. Repurposing a set of toilets, a new suite of computers was designed, built and installed within a two-week period before learners enrolled.

Avoiding indicators of an institutional setting lends Midvotech an informal flavour, but with a professionalism and ethos characteristic of a workplace in the media industries. Explained later, this informality emerged as an important theme in the research.

From an employee's perspective, Midvotech is marked by contradiction. This contradiction is prevalent, highly evident in interviews with managers as well as providing a motivation for me to undertake the study in the first place. Managers made numerous positive comments about Midvotech as a place to work:

> It's fun … everyone's lovely … a very social place … [pause] … the students are great (M87).

> It's nice – quite relaxed for a job environment. A nice environment to work in, physically. People are good as well. A creative environment to work in (M16).

> The majority of what I do is really good and the people are brilliant. We almost can't be compared to anywhere else, which is nice (M28).

Often, though, the positives were balanced by significant frustrations. For example, M20 saw Midvotech as, "Exciting, slightly unconventional and also entirely unpredictable." M95 voiced their frustration with aspects of Midvotech outside of their team: "I really love my job, what I do and what I get to see. I get very frustrated a lot of the time with things that are happening elsewhere … but actually for me I really really like my job." M29 could not identify the root of their own frustration: "It's definitely an odd beast." Both M95 and M37 remarked that, "every day is [totally] different."

The sometimes-extreme contradictory nature of Midvotech was summed up colourfully by one (anonymised) manager. "Depends on the day, or the hour at times. It can be a wonderful, amazing, creative, rewarding place. It can also feel like you're crawling through a sewer full of shit."

Alongside contradiction, another key theme in the study was change, which underpinned the research design. In the main, Midvotech was perceived to be subject to high levels of change, which was more often thought to be positive:

> Professionally, change is normally for the good; stops us becoming stale (M44).

> Change here is handled very well, it's never a negative thing. It's always a positive (M88).

Although some comments were more neutral:

> It's always been the case here that there's always something kicking off. You always think it can't keep changing, but it does (M20)

And some expressed reservations around the degree of change at Midvotech:

> The fear of the unknown is constantly there at [Midvotech]. It makes me uneasy about what's going to happen next (M87).
>
> Who knows when the change is going to stop. We're just constantly changing and morphing and growing. It's good, but it worries me (M47).

I led the education provision, which included Midvotech, in my role as Director of Education, reporting to Kirsten, the Managing Director (MD) and charismatic leader of the whole group. At the same time, I was granted privileged access to Midvotech as a research site, so the EdD study enabled an unusual perspective, redefining my status as leader-insider-researcher inside an a-typical provider within the under-researched FE sector. The embedded single-case (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 291) of Midvotech had two units of analysis; an unstructured interview with Kirsten, and a series of formal interviews with a number of Midvotech managers. As demonstrated above, in this account I am keen to allow the voices of participating managers to speak for themselves.

Figure 1 shows the growth in FE learner numbers at Midvotech, including the research period, 2013-2017. The lower line shows adult enrolments, the middle line 16-18s and the upper line indicates the total. The trajectory is clear, as is the relative shift towards 16-18-year-olds and fewer adults, due to changes in funding.

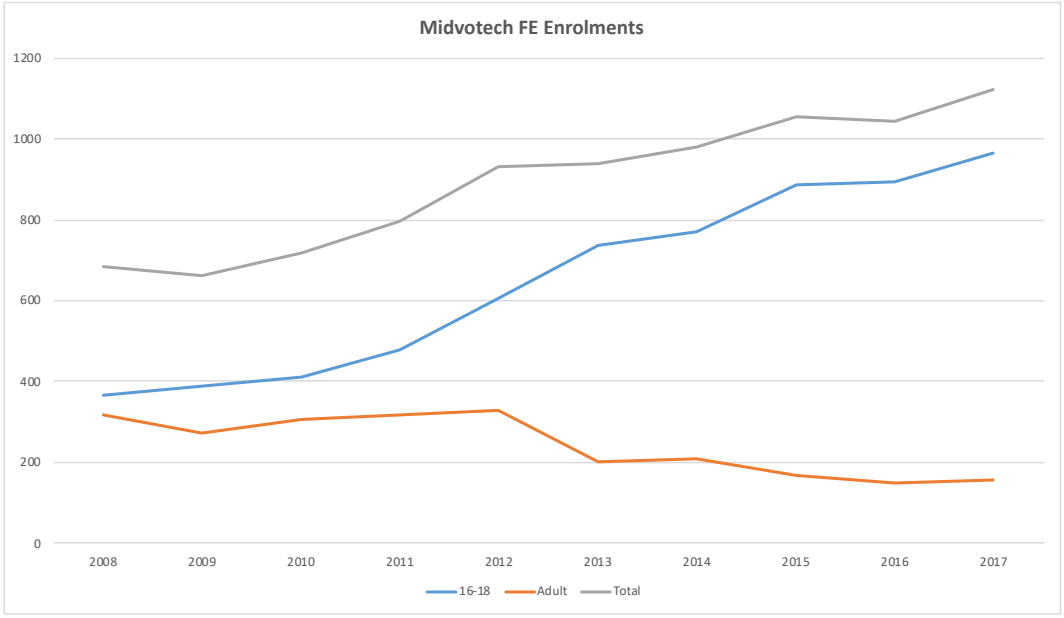


Figure 1: Midvotech FE growth

Evidently, policy changes impacted on Midvotech, as elsewhere in FE, but I became interested in how an organisation's public-private and contracting status affected its response to policy, culminating in the case study. Did Midvotech's contradictory nature result from shifts in policy? The impact of policy on colleges and the FE workforce featured prominently in the FE literature, outlined in *Chapter 2*. Was it similar for Midvotech?

My research questions related to the theme of change, evolving out of an intuition that change happened differently at Midvotech than in wider FE. Formal interviews with Midvotech managers included a series of questions about perceptions of change, shown in *Appendix 1*. The underpinning assumption was that differences in how change happened related to differences between private and public enterprise in FE, making Stephen Ball's work on private enterprise in education relevant.

The dominant position in the FE literature, often supported directly or indirectly by Ball's work on education policy, linked a claimed turbulence in FE with policy change or even policy 'busyness.' Because I wanted to understand how policy impacted Midvotech, Ball's work had a strong resonance with the Midvotech study here too, in relation to his work on policy, as well as his focus on private engagement in public education.

As my exploration of policy, change and private-public progressed, an intuition that the philosophy of Alain Badiou might play a valuable role in the study became increasingly strong. This was rooted in my reading around newness and its relationship to the notion of change, to which Badiou contributed a highly original perspective. His use of set theory resonated strongly with my conception of private and public from inside a private organisation. For example, using a Badiouian set theoretical analysis, from the perspective of the state, a subcontracted organisation *belonged* but was not *included*. These concepts of belonging and inclusion are explained in the section on Badiou in *Chapter 3*, but the point for now is that the perspective of private subcontracted FE is almost entirely absent from the literature, it is not *included*. This is doubly marked, given that the FE sector is itself already under-represented.

The dominant opinion of private enterprise in FE, supported by Ball, is one of suspicion. The newness contributed to FE by organisations like Midvotech

tends to be viewed as opportunistic, rather than an opportunity for the sector to enrich and change itself in positive ways. To respond to this pervasive suspicion in the sector, the Midvotech project was designed to reveal a private FE organisation, to deliberately *include* a voice from one of FE's many and varied collaborative providers.

The warrant for the Midvotech study is multiple. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, by including Midvotech in FE, the study contributes research from the FE sector, considered by some to be under-researched (e.g. Petrie, 2015, p. 7).

Secondly, privately-owned subcontracted provision in FE is virtually absent from the academic literature, so Midvotech begins to populate this gap. The study contributes the view of a private enterprise in a sector where the perspective of public FE colleges is dominant. In the relatively uncharted territory of subcontracted FE, the case of Midvotech is introduced as an example, capturing the experiences and opinions of a number of managers employed in an FE context different from the norm.

Supported by Stephen Ball, the dominant view casts policy as of prime importance to the form and function of FE. In this study, the philosophy of Alain Badiou is used to challenge this dominant view from inside a private provider, itself inside FE, but generally discounted. Thirdly, then, the Midvotech study contributes Badiou to the FE literature. Badiou's work is yet to be established in any significant way in education, so this is an unusual move.

The Midvotech study contributes to the growing number of EdD studies, a relatively new mode of academic research that attests to the value of different knowledges. Fourthly and finally, then, the study has a methodological warrant. The leader-insider-researcher role conflicts inherent to the study have a positive aspect, in that the difficulties encountered can inform future research.

The Midvotech study was strongly inflected by Badiou, who to a degree also had methodological influence, contributing to the more intuitive and speculative elements. Badiou helps circumscribe a poststructural positioning. In writing this thesis, I want the reader to experience the richness of the

data. Space has been left for alternative readings, and hopefully *Chapters 5* and *6* are not thematically over-constrained. The aim was to allow participants their voice as much as possible for the reader as the thesis unfolds, the shape of which is outlined below.

Following this introduction, *Chapter 2* explores the literatures significant to the Midvotech study. As well as outlining the FE in the academic literature relevant to the study, subcontracted FE is sketched out from a small and predominantly grey sub-literature, supplemented by publicly available data from the FE funding bodies.

FE is shown to be a turbulent and unstable sector, lacking a strongly defined identity and occupying something of a liminal space between schools and universities. With a remit to provide for a broad range of needs from multiple stakeholders, FE is required to be eminently flexible and subcontracting is one approach by which FE colleges achieve this flexibility, whilst maintaining value for money. Subcontracting in FE is a complex landscape, with many different providers and types of contractual relationship, both private and public.

Chapter 3 introduces the work of two thinkers, Stephen Ball and Alain Badiou, and outlines their significance to Midvotech.

Key relevant notions from Ball are explained, forming the basis for the analysis in *Chapter 5*. Stephen Ball is an authority on educational policy and privatisation in education. The clarity of his definition of three policy reform technologies - marketisation, managerialism and performativity – is key to orienting how Midvotech relates to public FE. His criticism of private enterprise in education is an important reference point, albeit difficult to relate directly to Midvotech, being itself an organisation partly responsible for the very privatisation under scrutiny.

Alain Badiou's focus on fundamental questions of novelty and change echo themes underpinning the Midvotech study. His philosophical system is employed in a number of ways, providing a theoretical perspective able to include any type of organisation, private or public, subcontracted or directly funded, fundamentally and radically inclusive by virtue of its basis in mathematics. Badiou's system is sketched out to the extent necessary to

appreciate his curious notion of subject, which is employed to re-imagine Kirsten and thereby re-explore Midvotech in *Chapter 6*.

Chapter 4 articulates the research questions as finally framed and describes the research process, including the methodology, methods, data collection, analysis and approach to ethics employed in the Midvotech study. The research design is explained as a poststructuralist embedded revelatory case study with hybrid elements. Data collection consisted of interviews with Kirsten and ten other Midvotech managers. My leader-insider-researcher status was at the root of more or less continual ethical questions, concerns and role conflicts.

Chapter 5 orients the reader to Midvotech, revealing the site through managers' commentary recorded in formal research interviews. Managers cast Midvotech as more agile than public FE, but at the cost of high levels of pressure. They voice conflicted perceptions around the relationship between education and business at Midvotech. Despite acknowledging a high degree of agency as managers, they also acknowledge Kirsten's final say on matters of strategic importance. National policy changes are overshadowed by more local concerns, even though Midvotech is able to respond well to external policy directives.

The subcontracting arrangement with the college lead provider appears to mediate the direct impact of policy for Midvotech. So, whilst the policy view, articulated in this study by Ball, is helpful in illuminating Midvotech in many ways, a number of tensions and contradictions appear to operate outside of policy concerns. *Chapter 6* therefore undertakes a Badiouian re-reading of the research site, ultimately casting Kirsten as Badiou's faithful subject.

Midvotech is viewed by some managers as a kind of 'bubble', which, whilst providing a level of protection, is paradoxically thought to reduce Midvotech's control over its own destiny. Badiou's notion of 'figures of the subject' is used to explore power relationships which had formed and were forming Midvotech over time. Midvotech managers express concerns around standards of education as business becomes more tightly linked to learning. Although some of Ball's concerns are reflected here, Badiou's distinctive notion of ethics is tentatively offered to revise Ball's critique of privatisation.

Chapter 7 considers the extent to which the study has achieved its aim and how the Midvotech project makes a contribution. The rich potential for the future use of Badiou's work in settings like Midvotech, and perhaps more generally, is explored. More speculatively, Badiou is suggested as an entry point to thinking the apparent deadlock in FE between state and sector.

Chapter 2: Relevant Literatures

This chapter reviews the academic literature and other commentaries and texts to sketch out what is already known about private subcontracted FE and to provide an extended reference point for the real site of Midvotech. In the absence of a ready-made literature, two main areas are examined. Firstly, the academic literature is used to outline the main themes and contests in the FE sector in England and briefly how FE relates to the wider frame of vocational education and training (VET). Secondly, there is an overview of the small, predominantly grey literature around subcontracted FE.

Because the Midvotech study not only contributes to a private subcontracted FE literature, but also to the small Badiou-in-education literature, the relevant Badiou literature is reviewed briefly towards the end of *Chapter 3*, after an exploration of his work.

Further Education in England

That FE is not well understood is a core claim in this thesis. There are multiple reference points for this view in the literature, with little disagreement. An expert summary of the history and status of FE, claimed that "it is not surprising that few understand [FE's] parameters and mission" due to its "complex, amorphous, and ever-changing" nature, "tied to fluctuations in employment and the labour market" and subject to "a constant bombardment of national policy emanating from a bewildering range of ministries, government agencies, and regulatory bodies" (Hodgson, Bailey, & Lucas, 2015, pp. 1-2). In fact, even "being part of the sector does not guarantee that they understand it" (Coffield, Edward, Finlay, Hodgson, & Spours, 2008, p. 17).

This lack of definition is evident even at government department level. For example, the FE area review mechanism was charged with being inappropriately one-size-fits-all, failing to recognise the complexity of FE sector:

> The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and the Department for Education appear to see area-based reviews of post-16 education as a fix-all solution to the current problems, but the reviews do not cover all types of

> provider and it is not clear how they will deliver a robust and financially sustainable sector (M. Hillier et al., 2015).

FE is partly invisible, "under-valued" (Bailey & Unwin, 2014, p. 449) and often viewed in a less than favourable light. "FE colleges still lack the status and visibility enjoyed by schools and universities in public life and in the research literature" (Bailey & Unwin, 2014, p. 449). According to the university sector, "the weakness of FE [is a] lack of research culture, poor libraries, lack of qualified staff" (Bird & Crawley, 1994, p. 39).

FE is considered under-researched; "where else would you find a £10 billion industry with no research[?]" (Petrie, 2015, p. 7, paraphrasing Coffield). Reinforcing this claim, the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* is biased towards higher education research and much FE research, if it happens at all, is not undertaken by FE practitioners (Y. Hillier, 2015, pp. 171-172).

Whilst schools and universities are reasonably well-mapped territories, FE is a poor fit within either camp, often (mis)understood as an adjunct to either or - impossibly - both. Lyotard ascribed distinct modes of knowledge to the two dominant domains; "Schools are functional; the University is speculative, that is to say, philosophical" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 33). The necessarily transitional role of FE leaves it in soft focus. One "throwaway definition" of FE was "everything that does not happen in schools or universities" (Kennedy, 1997, p. 1). FE:

> is an immensely complicated and varied sector, usually defined by its difference from both the school sector (it deals mainly with adults and has links with business) and higher education (it serves local communities and offers a second chance to those who have failed at school) (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 14).

Coffield et al. coined the term 'Learning and Skills System' (LSS), in an attempt to capture the breadth of their FE research focus, but LSS has not survived as a standard nomination. The same research team settled on a different term, 'post-compulsory education', in the book published to report on their study (Coffield et al., 2008). They had difficulty, like others, in satisfactorily pinning down such "an immensely complicated and varied sector" (2008, p. 14), referencing a paper to supplement their definition: "In

essence, FE is unified by being different" (Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005, p. 447).

It is a challenge to find a fully satisfactory definition of FE in the literature. It is most often defined negatively, by what it is *not*. We will see later that this indefinability has a flavour of Badiou's generic set about it, as well as being simply further evidence that the sector is not well understood.

Perhaps partly *because* it is not well understood, FE is typically portrayed as "turbulent" in the academic literature (Edward & Coffield, 2007, p. 125; Lumby, 2001, p. 1), consistently over a number of years. The word 'unstable' was used by Midvotech managers, relating this study to the claimed turbulence in FE.

Hyland & Merrill contributed an expert account of the development of FE, which had its roots in extra-state nineteenth century "working class 'self-help' movements." FE was made the legal responsibility of LEAs in the 1944 Education Act and mainly provided technical training with a work focus, often as day release. The remit for FE broadened over time but remained predominantly vocational, developing differently in different locations, leading to a diverse range of low-status provision with a local focus (2003, pp. 6-19).

The remit of the FE sector is generally viewed as post-school vocational provision. Since the fundamental dichotomy between academic and vocational education was crystallised in UK legislation in the 1944 Education Act, this division has been stubbornly immune to any kind of resolution (Ainley, 2007). According to Winch, unlike the German 'dual system', vocational education in Britain has a lack of balance between the academic aspects of an occupation, which are 'downplayed', and more practical aspects (Winch, 2010, pp. 182-183). This was perhaps due to ingrained class associations. Simmons claimed that, "although it has always been predominantly working class in nature, FE is now, more than ever, positioned firmly at the lower end of the institutional hierarchy in the highly class-stratified terrain of English education" (2010).

The academic-vocational dilemma is a perennial focus in the VET literature, which locates UK FE in a wider frame. The *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* (JVET) is a representative authority in FE, many contributors and editors of which are also important figures in the UK FE literature. JVET

highlights key concerns for vocational education and training, more recently with an increasingly international scope. Helping define the context of FE for this study, a number of themes have emerged in JVET over recent years, some more directly relevant than others. The international recognition or esteem of VET is generally accepted to be lower than that of its academic counterpart (e.g. Hippach-Schneider, Schneider, Ménard, & Tritscher-Archan, 2017), but especially so in the UK (e.g. Brockmann & Laurie, 2016). There is trans-national interest in apprenticeships as a mode of education delivery (e.g. Vaughan, 2017) with a related concern about apprentices' high drop-out rates (e.g. Fries, Göbel, & Maier, 2014). How vocational competence or knowledge is defined (e.g. Bathmaker, 2013) and how this 'knowledge' gained translates between work and learning environments (e.g. Sappa, Choy, & Aprea, 2016) have been foci of JVET. With reference to participants in VET, professional identity formation (e.g. Köpsén, 2014) and social mobility, inclusion and social justice (e.g. Avis, Orr, & Warmington, 2017) have received attention in the pages of JVET.

According to Avis, "[t]he FE sector occupies a liminal and contradictory space" (2009). Further degrading the definition of FE, Avis argued that the boundaries between sectors were becoming blurred, with two principal causes. Firstly, the then new 14-19 Diploma, which was intended to capitalise on links between schools and FE. Secondly, Foundation Degrees, which aimed to strengthen links between FE and the university sector. Of the two, Foundation Degrees turned out to be more successful; the 14-19 Diploma was dropped shortly after qualifying its first cohort. Avis argued for a "new localism", a term which Stephen Ball claimed was a "New Labour condensate" (Ball, 2007, p. 148) with a 'retrogressive' agenda at its core, of, "the privatisation of decision-making" (Ball, 2007, p. 9). Devolution and localism are still on the FE agenda, but a recent Association of Colleges (AoC) report outlined the challenges facing this approach:

> for the last three decades the balance of power between national and local has been simple and unidirectional, with power and discretion removed from local levels and transferred to national government and its various agencies (Keep, 2016, p. 13).

Despite the failure of the 14-19 Diploma, a partnership approach is held as the key to harnessing the complexity of FE. A recent manifesto from the Department for Education renewed the call for the education sector to work

together to achieve their complex collective goals (Department for Education, 2017), based this time around the principle of social mobility. At the time of writing, the state is feting apprenticeships as central to the education landscape of the future, with an inherent requirement for multi-agency working, most obviously close liaison between employers and education providers. However, for some, collaboration has proven more locally contingent than policymakers would like to be the case. "Collaboration at the local level is often as much the product of happenstance and improvisation as it is of strategy and tactics" (Higham & Yeomans, 2010).

The turbulence in FE provoked a focus in the literature on those who were employed in the sector (e.g. Lumby, 2009; Smith, 2007). A career in FE has become precarious and redundancies or temporary contracting have become commonplace (A. R. J. Briggs, 2005, p. 19; Gleeson & Shain, 1999, p. 473) in the "fragile" FE landscape (Keep, 2002, p. 463). In response, research focussed on what sort of professional identity was appropriate to this fraught setting. For example, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), the strategy of working to enhance communities of practice was proposed to unlock the local knowledge base for new teaching professionals (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005). For those teaching HE in an FE context, anxieties associated with developing an academic identity were explored (Feather, 2010; Turner, McKenzie, & Stone, 2009), which contributed to work around identity formation more generally in FE (Spenceley, 2011). Particular issues associated with part-time employment in FE were also studied (Jameson & Hillier, 2008).

With its complex relationship to professional identity, the meaning of professionalism became a significant question in the FE literature (e.g. A. R. J. Briggs, 2005; Gleeson et al., 2005). In turn, this theme both provoked and responded to changes in FE teaching qualifications, which underwent a string of reformulations (LSIS, 2013). Contributing to these debates around professionalism in the FE context, the *Transforming Learning Cultures in FE* (TLC) project engaged 24 FE tutors across 16 colleges over a four-year period, with classroom observations to inform findings. The study concluded that "understanding professionalism in FE requires a subtle approach that takes cognisance of other major 'ecological' influences on the learning culture" and that prevailing conceptions of professionalism lacked human agency (Gleeson & James, 2007, p. 464).

FE managers' professionalism was researched (A. R. J. Briggs, 2005), Stoten (2011) explored leadership in FE and Page (2013) categorised FE managers' coping strategies; ranging from compliant, through effective to non-compliant, including dissent. Ann Briggs undertook multiple case studies of middle managers, investigating four English FE colleges using interviews and questionnaires. Developing an idealised model of professionalism for FE, she concluded that whilst most middle managers understood their role well, they had difficulty relating their own function to other parts of their organisation, "the multiplicity of roles which go to make up the functioning of the whole college" (A. R. J. Briggs, 2005, p. 22). Managers' were unclear how their own position related to the national context and Briggs concluded that improved understanding of context at middle manager level would benefit college functioning, thereby impacting FE in general. Apart from Kirsten, the Midvotech informants were all middle managers in FE, so I became interested in how they understood their wider context in a similar way. Some of the research interview questions, provided in *Appendix 1*, were formed in response to this part of the literature.

What was at the root of the turbulence in FE? According to many commentators, constant change in government policy was a significant causal factor, if not *the* cause, of continual upheaval in FE (Coffield et al., 2007). The FE sector was subject to a "somewhat chaotic" (Panchamia, 2012, p. 1) approach to policy-making. According to Stephen Ball, this was true of education at all levels; "Education policy itself is clearly … full of contradictions and attempts, however misconceived, **to save itself from itself**" (2004, p. 23, original emphasis). If policy-making was at the root of FE's turbulent nature, then Ball was a useful authority, often referenced, directly or indirectly, by those more centre-stage in the FE literature, as explained more fully in *Chapter 3*.

Policy and practice were widely believed to be in tension; a conflict between "economies of performance" and "ecologies of practice" (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 102; Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002). Policy was "incoherent" (Souto-Otero, 2012, p. 32) and some were suspicions about how real or fundamental any change actually was. Hayward et al. claimed that "policy busyness" caused the FE sector's inability to respond effectively to policy changes (2006), a cynical "manufactured complexity" (Coffield et al.,

2008, p. 154). For Dennis, policy incoherence was responsible for a growing ethical deficit that forced a beleaguered FE sector to adopt "an ethics of survival" (2016). Dennis's ethical framework was not clear, but the notion led me to consider what ethical principles might be pertinent to Midvotech. We will see later that an organisational self-interest or survivalism was certainly visible in the Midvotech data, including from Kirsten herself. One question posed ultimately by the Midvotech study was whether Badiou's notion of ethics might be a contender.

Like the notion of professionalism in education, the strained interrelationship between policy and practice attracted research funding. As well as the DfES-funded VITAE project in schools (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006), an extensive ESRC study in FE, *The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the Learning and Skills Sector* (IPLI), concluded that "managers and tutors mediate national policy and translate it (and sometimes mistranslate it) into local plans and practices" (Coffield et al., 2007, p. 723). The research team observed a range of levels of compliance, building on Shain and Gleeson's identification of "three different lecturer responses to changing conditions of work in FE … resistance, compliance and strategic compliance" (1999). This notion of compliance was helpful in understanding how Midvotech managers negotiated external changes in policy, explored more deeply in *Chapter 5*.

Shifting policy was evidently a constant in FE, illustrated through snapshots of the stated mission of the sector. For example, Hyland & Merrill related the post-school educational objectives of the late 1990's New Labour Government, which included the, "widening of participation in further and higher education to foster greater social inclusion and cohesion and the raising of skill levels to enhance Britain's economic competitiveness" (2003, p. 5).

Compare this with the FE policy context summarised by the AoC some 10 years later in a governor's briefing paper:

> [the] vision for driving positive change in public services sits with the wider Government ambition of:
>
> - consumer choice to force colleges and other providers to raise their game;

- competition to create pressure to raise standards;
- payment for results on the outcomes that society needs; and
- transparency about what is spent and what it achieved.

> This is underpinned by a philosophy of local democratic accountability. To support this, the Government has reviewed the funding methodology and encourages the sector to look at innovative, cost-effective ways of delivering what the economy needs. This includes new models of delivery through partnerships, mergers, federations, and collaborative arrangements between different services, sectors and employers, and outsourcing to the private sector (AoC, 2014).

Towards the end of the Cameron-Clegg coalition government, a working paper reported on the progress made in FE. Although there had been proportional growth in the number of 16-18 year-olds engaged in full-time education, it was considered too soon to assess the real effects of coalition curriculum reforms, especially with respect to the apprenticeship agenda and the focus on vocational education provision (Lupton, Unwin, & Thomson, 2015). These two agendas are still in the policy spotlight.

There have been regular changes in funding, one of the state's principal policy tools and part of the constant and "widespread structural change" in FE (Edward, Coffield, Steer, & Gregson, 2007, p. 155). 2017 saw significant changes to the funding of the sector in England, with the establishment of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), which merged the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), formerly responsible for funding post-19 students in FE, and the Education Funding Agency (EFA), responsible for funding 16-18 year old learners prior to the change (Greening, 2017). The SFA and EFA had been running in parallel, with different funding methodologies and reporting protocols since the previous change to the funding bodies in 2012, which saw the dissolution of the Young Persons Learning Agency (YPLA). Before that, in 2010, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) had been superseded, which had in turn replaced the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in 2001.

The LSC was introduced by New Labour and was in existence for nearly a decade. However, this apparent decade-long stability glossed over a number of fundamental policy shifts. For example, the radical introduction of 'plan-led' funding, replaced only a few years later by the even more radical 'demand-led' funding. Not long after that, a change to the machinery of government in

June 2007 meant that oversight for 14-19-year-olds and adults fell within the remit of separate government departments, which worked directly against the role of the LSC to oversee post-16 education as a united whole. Attempts to reorganise FE through Strategic Area Reviews (StAR) were "quietly dropped" after only a couple of years of further upheaval. In addition, relative influence switching between local, regional and national aspects of the LSC left the FE providers wondering who they most needed to be paying attention to (Coffield et al., 2008, pp. 4-12).

The LSC period saw a significant rise in funding levels for FE, from £5.5bn in 2001 to over double that amount, £11.4bn, by the 2007-8 academic year (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 5). Since then funding for FE has fallen again, in the 2016/17 academic year to just over £9.7bn, split into nearly £5.9bn allocated to 16-18 learners (EFA, 2016a) and just over £3.8bn for 19-plus adult learners (SFA, 2016). The SFA budget paid for a number of different types of provision, including apprenticeships, traineeships and adult learner loans. Similarly, the EFA funded a number of different types of organisation, including GFECs, Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) and Agricultural and Horticultural Colleges (AHCs) as well as other specialist providers and Commercial and Charitable Providers (CCPs), such as Barnardo's.

Despite the charge of 'policy busyness', a claimed through-line to policy moves is strongly represented in the literature. The reform agenda is most commonly read as being linked to the marketisation of FE (e.g. Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Shain & Gleeson, 1999). Keep identified two key contradictions or "points of fracture" in FE. Firstly, the contest between national and local, highlighted above, marking out an apparent battle between policymakers and the sector. Secondly, at the same time, the tension between planning and markets (2016, p. 13).

'Incorporation' in 1993 is considered by many to be the most critical point in the history of FE reform, very well-rehearsed in the literature. Instigated by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, incorporation removed direct LEA oversight from FE colleges (e.g. A. R. J. Briggs, 2005, p. 19; Lumby & Tomlinson, 2000; Page, 2010, pp. 126-128; Shain & Gleeson, 1999, p. 447). This deregulation is blamed for a number of key radical shifts in FE. For example, the change in the concept of professionalism (A. R. J. Briggs, 2005), the necessity of a new type of strategic thinking for college managers

(Lumby, 1999), and the onset of policy instability in the sector (Shain & Gleeson, 1999). Crucially for the Midvotech study, incorporation was also the doorway into the FE sector for alternative providers.

According to Ainley, incorporation evidenced that the state itself was on a trajectory towards a "new market-state" (Ainley, 2004, p. 499). However, the sector's post-incorporation "long term drift towards the marketisation" (Stoten, 2011, p. 289) did not (yet) constitute a true market. Even outside of education, a truly free market was seen by some as unachievable. "Markets do not magically produce fair exchange. Fair and efficient exchange requires regulation of the economy" (Walby, 2018, pp. 143-144). FE has therefore been dubbed a "quasi-market" (Ainley, 2007; Lumby, 2003; Smith, 2007). Many believe it to be a "semi-regulated and constrained market, rather than in a genuinely open market" (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 19) and this FE quasi-market is subject to state intervention in the form of "policy levers" (Spours, Coffield, & Gregson, 2007).

The level of marketisation in FE is questionable in other ways. Nearly twenty years after incorporation in 2012, colleges were further reclassified as Non-Profit Institutions Serving Households (NPISH) (ONS, 2012). In theory, this removed any residual public sector control, but the role of FE Commissioner was introduced shortly after, in November 2013, with a remit to intervene when colleges showed signs of financial failure (M. Hillier et al., 2015). Not only did this cast doubt on the reality of freedom from public sector control, it was another example of apparently inconsistent policy-making.

At odds with the dominant view of the critical importance of incorporation, some claim that contemporary FE colleges are actually very similar to those a century ago. Bailey and Unwin argued that FE had always been a 'market' of sorts, citing its responsiveness to student demand, which "makes [colleges] such a conundrum and irritant for policy-makers" (2014, p. 450). In fact, rather than creaking under the weight of state scrutiny, FE colleges had actually been subject to a "*lack* of policy commitment to the education of young people beyond school-leaving age" (2014, p. 449, emphasis added).

If there had been little fundamental change in FE, what *had* changed was what colleges offered. In the 1930s, there was a need for training in new manufacturing industries, like electrical appliances and consumer goods. This

changed to predominantly day-release provision for the engineering, building and coal industries in the later 1940s and 1950s. In the late 1970s, FE was required to provide training schemes to re-skill those left without work, a knock-on effect of the contraction of the manufacturing industries. This transformed again in the late 1980s to a more general offer, to accommodate increasing numbers of young people opting to stay in education after school (ibid.).

Subcontracting in FE

That FE is not one thing is acknowledged in the academic literature. It is a "complex, amorphous, and ever-changing sector" with a "low political profile" (Hodgson et al., 2015, p. 1). FE is multiple even across Britain, constituted differently in each UK country. Often depicted as a sector in conflict, FE is subject to tensions arising from disparate needs and expectations from numerous stakeholders: "The diversity of the sector reflects the fact that there are three main interest groups – the government, employers and learners – who have different, and at times conflicting, objectives" (Panchamia, 2012).

The sheer range of learners with a broad spectrum of needs dictates that FE is highly adaptable. Many providers achieve the necessary flexibility by contracted out provision to third parties, in whole or part. Subcontracting in this way was made more possible by, and even encouraged after, incorporation. However, a recurrent criticism of the practice has been that employers can, and do, subsidise their staff development and training costs using public money through subcontracting arrangements (Kennedy, 1997, pp. 49-50). Subcontracting by its nature enables increased private engagement in public services, prompting Stephen Ball to question, "the role of the profit motive, and a systematic neglect of business failures, and of business ethics" (2004, p. 2).

More positively, private involvement in FE delivery through subcontracting is seen by some as giving "opportunities to people who might otherwise never have entered learning and gained qualifications" (Kennedy, 1997, p. 83), improving access, especially for disadvantaged groups.

FE subcontracting, though, is almost entirely absent from the academic literature. Much of the relevant information is journalistic or otherwise grey. The lack of an adequate definition for FE was highlighted in the previous section, but an overarching definition of the variety of organisations constituting subcontracted FE is even more of a challenge. We will see later that, importantly for the Midvotech study, Alain Badiou offers a way of thinking such indefinability. The FE sector, including its subcontracted elements, could be considered a non-constructible set, a notion explained later in *Chapter 3*.

Publicly available data charts the extent of subcontracting in FE, which accounted for around £800m of funding in 2016/17. Of the two main categories of learners in FE, school-leavers and older students or adults returning to study, the more mature participants probably demand most flexibility. Supporting this view, over 18% of adult FE provision was subcontracted in 2016/17 (SFA, 2017), compared to around 8% of FE as a whole. However, this 8% was not an insignificant proportion, considering the much larger numbers of 16-18 learners on more traditional A-level courses, BTEC study programmes, and the like (Offord & Burke, 2016).

Lead providers are required to declare subcontracting arrangements totalling £100,000 or more, so it is part of the public record that nearly 75% of General FE Colleges engage third parties (SFA, 2017) to help discharge their funding allocation commitments; 157 of the 210 listed by the AoC (2016), in 2016/17. By comparison, less than 6% of Sixth Form Colleges, where most A-level delivery takes place, contract out provision. To a lesser extent, local government and universities act as lead providers for subcontracted provision, but by far the largest part is actually delivered by non-college lead providers, representing half of all SFA subcontracting. Learndirect Limited and the British Army owned the largest contracts in 2016/17, worth £39m and £23m respectively. However, the true extent of subcontracting is not fully known, because is not possible to see how widespread subcontracting is below the £100,000 threshold.

Despite its prevalence, FE subcontracting is contentious. Some colleges view subcontracting as an existential threat, perhaps with good reason; there are fewer colleges now than 25 years ago. The University and College Union maintain a strong ideological "fight" against "the creeping privatisation of

tertiary education" (UCU, 2008, p. 5, 2017). However, it is difficult to assess how responsible subcontracting is for the disappearance of colleges, when FE funding levels are in decline in real terms. "16 – 18 education has been the big loser from changes over the last 25 years, with spending per student in further education now below that in secondary schools" (Belfield, Crawford, & Sibieta, 2017, p. 30).

Struggling colleges employ strategies of partnership and merger to stay in business, sometimes as a result of FE Commissioner intervention. According to the AoC, the number of colleges has fallen by nearly a third since incorporation (2017). The FE Commissioner stated in a letter to the sector, "As budgets tighten across the FE sector … the truth of the matter is that there is clearly not enough money for the sector to continue as it is and rationalisation and collaboration is the new order of the day" (Collins, 2015).

There were over 40 college mergers between 2008 and 2016, with more planned or in progress at the time of writing. Around a quarter of college mergers since 2008 took place in the 2015/16 academic year, coinciding with the post-16 Area Review process (BIS, 2015). There have been different approaches to merger, some involving organisations other than colleges. For example, three colleges became part of higher education institutions (HEIs) between 2011 and 2014.

Outcomes of mergers are not consistent across the sector. Upheaval surrounding the formation of joint institutions is both extended *and* short-lived. Two mergers, completed in 2009, have subsequently undergone further merger processes and two other mergers have since been dissolved. Over 90% of merger activity involved GFECs; only two sixth form colleges were created through merger between 2008 and 2016 (AoC, 2016). College mergers have been seen across England, but with the Greater London, South West and West Midlands areas accounting for around half of the total number in the same period.

There is a small literature specific to subcontracting in FE, mainly contained in a single collection of papers (Fletcher, 2000), itself evidence of the strength of feeling around the phenomenon at the time, considering the relative rarity of research contributions from FE practitioners and managers. The suspicion surrounding subcontracted FE provision results partly from its track record in

the mid 1990s when there was a rapid rise in what was then termed 'franchising', which actually accounted for "the majority (perhaps 80%) of the additional student numbers enrolled between 1993 and 1998" (Dominey, 2000, p. 12).

The franchise boom was considered by some to be entirely profit motivated, exploiting opportunities in non-priority curriculum areas (Styles, 2000). The almost-unanimous criticism foreshadowed Ball's private-public cautions, explored in *Chapter 3*. "Franchising's incontinent appetites have the potential to discredit and destabilise a public service whose aim is to significantly combat the effects of poverty and social exclusion" (Rospigliosi, 2000, p. 159). Perry claimed that franchising "provided a way for colleges to avoid cuts, expand staff, not worry about missing targets, please governors and pose as thrusting entrepreneurs … The fact that some colleges went into excess was inevitable" (2000, p. 67).

Aside from the reputational damage to the sector, including high-profile cases of fraud (Crequer, 1998; Goddard-Patel, 2004; Nash, 2007), franchising was charged with an irrevocably negative impact on FE, even distorting funding mechanisms;

> During the more expansive franchising period of 1995/97, where the revenues from franchising were as uncertain as the costs, franchising may have had a destabilising effect. The funding method may in future have to change dependent on how the colleges behave. If a large number of colleges franchise, the funding method will have to accommodate this new scenario and will do so in a way that may disadvantage the colleges that do not franchise (Birmingham University School of Education, 2000, pp. 64-65).

Franchising was an embarrassing episode in the history of the sector, no doubt why the term 'subcontracting' is now preferred. In some ways, franchised provision was never really 'franchised' anyway. It was easy to understand the term 'franchise' and the process of franchising in terms of sales of goods, but it was less clear what franchise might mean for the provision of services like education (Aurini & Davies, 2004).

Following the scandals, the state, via the funding agencies, introduced more rigorous legislation around subcontracting, strengthened each year since.

Franchising provided a clear and explicit mandate for insisting on additional controls and procedures;

> Some subcontracting arrangements have created substantial financial and reputation issues for institutions in the past, particularly where the subcontracted delivery has taken place at a distance from the directly funded institution. One particular concern is how the funding body has assured the proper use of public money, when funding is being transferred by publicly funded institutions to the independent sector. Directly funded institutions must properly monitor and control all subcontracted delivery of study programmes. Institutions must not make artificial distinctions or distortions when describing delivery arrangements in order to avoid the application of these regulations (ESFA, 2017, p. 5).

Clause 21.6 of the Financial Memorandum for FE was toughened for the 2015/16 academic year to include a new specific reference to subcontracting in relation to fraud, placing responsibility on providers to report "suspected fraud or financial irregularity in the delivery of the Provision including but not limited to fraud involving subcontractors" (SFA, 2015).

Paradoxically, at the same time as tightening regulation, the state acted to stimulate growth in subcontracting. Clearly, this contradiction reflected policy incoherence in the FE sector as a whole, referred to in the previous section. To "create efficiencies within the Agency and economies of scale across the sector" (SFA, 2010, p. 11), the SFA introduced a £500,000 minimum contract level (MCL) for direct contracts in the 2011/12 academic year. However, simultaneously the SFA explicitly encouraged "a new contracting arrangement, be this through a new sub-contracting relationship or a new collaborative arrangement between providers" for previously funded organisations affected by the MCL to continue to fund provision (SFA, 2010, p. 17).

FE subcontracting is complex. For simplicity, above I have used the terms 'subcontracted' and 'private' more or less interchangeably. Both are certainly true of Midvotech. However, organisations can inter-relate in diverse ways. For example, as well as overseeing their own third-party contracts, many public lead providers also enter into subcontracting arrangements with other lead providers. FE Week claimed this inter-lead subcontracting accounted for one third of all SFA subcontracting in 2013 (Henwood, 2013). In 2016/17,

Learning Curve (JAA) Limited was allocated nearly £9m as a lead provider. However, the organisation held contracts worth £10m for subcontracting out its own services to as many as 26 other lead provider partners countrywide.

According to public records, lead providers are predominantly GFECs, accounting for over 80% of the total subcontracted income. However, in 2016/17, 16 of the GFEC lead providers were themselves subcontracted to other lead providers. Two colleges on the list of 26 Learning Curve partners acted, in turn, as lead providers to another college on the same list.

CITB, a large training organisation with a funding allocation of nearly £44m, operated 147 subcontracts in 2016/17, worth nearly £26m, as well as acting as lead provider to 15 of the 16 Learning Curve inter-lead providers. Learndirect Limited, with a direct SFA allocation of nearly £160m, subcontracted 55 providers in 2016/17, representing just over £39m in funding income (SFA, 2016, 2017).

Income from subcontracting can be significant, but £multi-million contracts are the exception rather than the rule. In 2016/17, across the total of 1524 subcontractors listed by the EFA and SFA (EFA, 2016b; SFA, 2017), only Learning Curve exceeded £10m in funding value for subcontracted work. In fact, 99.5% of FE subcontractors drew down less than £5m funding for their subcontracted provision, falling to 88.6% with subcontracting activity worth less than £1m. Around half of subcontractors held contracts valued at less than £250,000 and the average contract size across all subcontractors was around £500,000. If an average college income was estimated at around £20m, most colleges would be significantly larger than most subcontractors.

The statistics above relate to funding amounts, but lead providers normally levy a management fee, which has also attracted controversy. The level of top-slice varies but TES claimed an average of 22% was held back by lead providers (Belgutay, 2016) and FE Week called for more transparency, claiming that Learndirect retained 36% of funding actually earned by its subcontractors (Offord, 2016). A campaign against providers who declined to declare their management fees stoked a popular suspicion, especially prevalent during the franchise boom of the 90s, that subcontracting subsidised core college provision to the longer term detriment of the FE sector as a whole (Birmingham University School of Education, 2000).

Summary

Relatively low levels of research contribute to the difficulty in constructing a stable image of the FE sector from the literature. Not well understood at any level, FE occupies a liminal space between schools and universities, with blurred boundaries on either side, as well as inhabiting the lower-status vocational side of an academic-vocational divide.

FE is turbulent, the result of incoherent or chaotic policy-making in the sector. Changes to agencies and funding, updated annually through the FE funding methodology, reflect this shifting policy context. Policy and practice are believed to be in tension.

The instability in the sector impacts on the FE workforce, and debates around the human impact of FE 'policy busyness' prompted my own questions about whether similar phenomena were apparent in FE outside of colleges. This was the starting point for the Midvotech study.

Many see the marketisation of FE as the key driver for the reform of the sector, beginning with incorporation in 1993, which also opened the door to alternative providers. Although the notion of a market presupposes competition, paradoxically, the state encourages collaboration as the principal means to enable necessary flexibility whilst achieving value for money. Collaborative activity ranges widely, from diverse outsourcing and subcontracting arrangements to full-blown college mergers.

An all-inclusive view of FE does not exist, and FE colleges dominate the comparatively little research in the sector. FE subcontracting has little or no voice in the literature, although it is often viewed negatively, part of the drive towards marketisation as well as being seen as responsible for fraudulent practices in the franchising boom of the mid to late 1990's. However, subcontracted FE accounts for a significant part of the sector. It is complex in nature and a wide range of organisations are involved, both private and public. A small number of very large contracts, both privately and publicly owned, dominate a landscape of outsourcing, consisting of a wide and inconsistent range of sizes and terms of contract.

Given the complexity of the FE sector, especially including subcontracting, the lack of understanding of FE is perhaps not surprising. Exacerbated by a relative lack of research, the characteristic indefinability of FE perhaps explains the apparent battle between state and sector. The level of policy barrage suggests an unresponsive sector and a frustrated state, locked in a vicious cycle.

The Midvotech contract, although unusually large for the type of provision, was straightforward compared to the possible complexity of subcontracting arrangements. The FE literature didn't illuminate Midvotech particularly well, but it didn't appear typical of a private subcontracted FE provider either. Midvotech's value was most likely in its *dis*-similarity, its status as outlier.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Reference Points

This chapter explores the work of two thinkers, Stephen Ball and Alain Badiou, drawing out their relevance to the Midvotech study.

Stephen Ball is a highly-respected educational theorist whose 'policy sociology' has been used directly and indirectly to understand FE, especially his reform technologies of managerialism, marketisation and performativity. He argues that national policy is inflected by neoliberal ideology, a perspective underpinning his extended critique of privatisation in education, to which the Midvotech study is a response. Ball constituted an authoritative reference point for the study, clearly articulating the interrelationship between UK education and policy-making. This related to my own focus on how policy related to practice in Midvotech, an organisation that played its part in the privatisation of education Ball was so highly critical of.

In many ways by contrast, Alain Badiou is a philosopher with a growing international reputation, yet more-or-less absent from the educational literatures. His often-difficult and highly abstract philosophy provided a bridge for the Midvotech study to posit the possibility of something like an ethics of privatisation. Badiou was used to re-read the Midvotech research data, in some ways extending insights attained using Ball. Relevant parts of his philosophical system are explained in this chapter, after an exploration of Ball, with a view to scaffolding an understanding of his unique conception of subject, vital to appreciating *Chapter 6*.

Stephen Ball

Stephen Ball is important to the Midvotech study in two main ways, but his work also inspired other elements. Firstly, Ball is a recognised authority on education policy, relating directly to the concerns of the study. He is currently Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology of Education at UCL Institute of Education (UCL, 2018) and co-founder and managing editor of the *Journal of Education Policy*. Secondly, developing from his analysis of the rise of managerialism, he is strongly critical of the 'privatisation' of education. This relates to the aim of the Midvotech study, to give voice to a private provider in order to respond to the dominant critique, which Ball's position represents.

For example, Ball claimed increasing private involvement resulted in a change in the meaning of private and public, with irreparable damage to education services.

Ball exemplifies a policy view of the education landscape, which has been used to explain FE turbulence. His research concerns are around policy, policy technologies and the interconnections between social class and education policy, for which he borrows Ozga's term, "policy sociology" (2006, p. 5). His theoretical roots are in the poststructuralist work of Bourdieu and Foucault, as well as Max Weber's class theory (Ball, 2006, pp. 2-4). The development of and interplay between practice and theory has been a key concern and navigational aid in Ball's policy sociology work (2010) and he has written more recently at length on the relevance of Foucault's ideas and approach to education (2013a, 2017).

Ball reflected that his approach had three main facets; "critical policy analysis, post-structuralism and critical ethnography" (1994, p. 2). He has honed his critical understanding of policy using an ethnographic methodology:

> [A]nother crucial component for me in the dynamic and development of my work is theory … If I am to explain myself and my work I also have to say that I am an ethnographer, I construct, manage and analyse data using ethnographic methods and sensitivities (2006, pp. 1-3).

His approach influenced the design of the Midvotech study, partly through my high regard for his critically acclaimed *Beachside Comprehensive* (1981). The nature of his insider-researcher approach to *Beachside*, his PhD study, and the importance of theory in Ball's work both inspired aspects of the Midvotech study. His critique of neoliberalism also served to highlight what sort of organisation Midvotech was.

Neoliberalism

For Ball and many others, a claimed education reform agenda was rooted in a neoliberal turn (Ball, 2008, pp. 75-83). Neoliberalism was built around an "argument for freedom ... that we ought to leave room for the unforeseeable free growth" (Hayek, 1944, p. 54), but was "highly contradictory, with anomalies between the rhetoric and the reality … nor is it as all-embracing as

it makes out" (Holborow, 2012, p. 32) and neoliberals tended not to define themselves as such (Holborow, 2012, p. 15). Neoliberalism's contradictions are perhaps reflected in Midvotech's contradictory nature, highlighted in *Chapters 6* and *7*.

Neoliberalism was a powerful influence on government policy, most notably that of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government in the UK, which came to power in 1979. Ball traced the neoliberal influence to Keith Joseph, Thatcher's mentor during her leadership of the Conservative opposition, who lobbied for 'social market economy' and 'monetarism':

> This rested on a rejection of extensive state regulation, high taxation, high levels of public spending, borrowing and subsidies, and the role of unions as monopoly suppliers of labour ... What was needed was 'more market, less state' – deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation (2007, p. 17).

Ball later made a distinction between neoliberalism, and *post*-neoliberalism:

> in the sense of reasserting the role of the state but in a new form and with new modalities involving a shift from government to governance; that is from bureaucracy to networks; from delivery to contracting (2012, p. 11).

The key criticism of neoliberalism was its negative impact on equality, because "neoliberal thought emphasizes the necessity of competition … [where] there are winners and losers" (Dean, 2009, p. 57). The neoliberal view of the sovereignty of the market legitimised a belief in a total freedom of choice; organisations were required to become perfectly responsive to consumer demand. Bourdieu described this "absolute reign of flexibility" in the neoliberal project, under which employees were hired,

> on fixed-term contracts or on a temporary basis and repeated corporate restructurings and, within the firm itself, competition among autonomous divisions as well as among teams forced to perform multiple functions (Bourdieu, 1998).

This was certainly highly visible in FE, underlying the key research concerns in the literature, drawn out in *Chapter 2*. This included the normalisation of business mechanisms in the educational context, such as merger.

Borrowing a term from Foucault, Ball traced what he called "policy genealogies" (2013b) in UK education up to and including the Cameron-Clegg coalition government. He described the coalition as a curious and inconsistent mix of neoliberal elements – such as private involvement in public services and the devolving of state responsibilities – and neoconservative elements – in a return to traditional subjects and the stipulation of the school curriculum:

> Conservative education policy is not of a piece. Rather it is a bricolage of often incoherent international 'borrowings', the input of a diverse set of 'think tanks' … [with] the underlying tensions of traditionalism ('real subjects'), liberalism (school diversity and choice) and economism (vocationalism) (Ball & Exley, 2011, p. 113).

Policy Technologies

As identified in *Chapter 2*, the FE literature described an overarching policy trajectory towards marketisation, which had its roots in neoliberal ideology. Ball outlined "three interrelated *policy technologies*; the market, managerialism and performativity … closely inter-dependent in the process of reform" (2003, p. 215). According to Ball, new public management, performativity and marketisation formed a complex "reform 'package'" (2008, p. 44). This triumvirate of reform was a useful point of reference in the Midvotech study and underpins *Chapter 5*.

Ball noted that the neoliberal marketisation of education introduced the "dynamics of competition into public sector systems", leading to an orientation towards organisational "self-interest" or "survivalism" and a "shift away from concern with more general social and educational issues" (2008, p. 45). This institutional survivalism was evident in FE colleges' response to the proposed introduction of demand-led funding, which was "initially one of shock and mild hysteria which over time has mellowed into a pragmatic determination to protect their institutions" (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 23). At worst, institutions competed for 'customers' secondarily to providing a core public service; a "dangerous distraction" borne out of the "concentration on products rather than processes, on customers rather than learners, on funding formulae and administration rather than pedagogy" (ibid., p. 20).

For many, marketisation was inconsistent with the 'socially responsible' aims of education, feeding suspicions of new organisations the market introduced. Ball observed that "Markets are by their nature unstable and not all businesses are socially responsible. Education reform policy trades on what is often a romantic view of the private sector erasing its warts and blemishes" (2007, pp. 186-187).

In managerialism, the second of Ball's policy technologies, the manager became "the cultural hero of the new public service paradigm", armed with a "deeply paradoxical" mix of delegated control, encouraging subordinates to shine through displays of initiative, and "new forms of very immediate surveillance" (Ball, 2008, pp. 47-48). Management tools such as appraisals and agreed objectives helped employees self-manage, enabling them to strive for 'excellence' and 'quality', aspirations themselves difficult to pin down. In FE, this managerialism in the public sector, or New Public Management (NPM), was blamed for a widening gap between the interests of managers and teaching staff (Gleeson & Shain, 1999).

The third term in Ball's triple reform package, performativity, was coined by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). Ball painted performativity as a "terror" in an often-cited paper (2003), frequently referenced in the FE literature. He described it as, "a regime of accountability that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change" (2008, p. 49). For Ball, "part of the work of performativity is the technical and discursive re-imagining of education as a commodity" (Ball, 2007, p. 24). The rise and impact of performativity was recognised in FE (Lobb, 2017; Whitehead, 2005), and Lumby argued its impact on equality, excluding minority groups from leadership roles (Lumby, 2009).

Through performativity, the 'worth' of the practitioner became open to rising scrutiny, an effect apparent in the FE literature around questions of professionalism and professional identity. This had paradoxical consequences. Ball used Lyotard's 'law of contradiction' to explain how an increased commitment to raising performance was offset by a concurrent need to resource the judgement of any performance improvement. This assessment overhead intruded upon the original activity, creating an absurd loop, because a desire for improvement was the very reason for introducing the secondary process (2003, p. 221). According to Ball, performativity perversely resulted

in a *loss* of transparency, rather than an increase in clarity through meticulous measurement, as logic might suggest.

According to Ball, the close scrutiny and constant measurement in performativity led to "self-doubt and personal anxiety" (2003, p. 220). Highlighting the close interrelationships in his triple reform package, Ball also identified a close connection between anxiety and the market; "Risk, uncertainty and anxiety, in part produced by the market, are also themselves market opportunities – spaces to be filled" (2006, p. 140). He cast performativity as obsessive, "insatiable" measurement and scrutiny (2007, p. 27). However, the measurement was not necessarily external, and Rose highlighted the disturbing Foucauldian dimension of *self-imposed* measurement in performativity, as we "make a life for ourselves under the constant gaze of our own suspicious reflexivity, tormented by uncertainty and doubt" (1998, p. 9).

According to Ball, this triumvirate of policy technologies replaced the dyadic "older policy technologies of professionalism and bureaucracy" with the "highly personal" consequence that "teachers, as ethical subjects, find their values challenged or displaced … [setting] the care of the self against the duty to others … Value replaces values" (2006, pp. 144-145). This clearly echoes the concerns around FE professionalism, highlighted in the previous chapter.

Privatisation

Of key relevance to the Midvotech study, Ball was highly critical of what he saw as the privatisation of education. Despite his condemnation, he was careful to acknowledge that "privatisation is an ongoing and contested process, not a complete, predictable nor necessarily foregone one" (2007, p. 184). Whilst his criticism was strong, it was also generally balanced, well aware of the position he was staking out:

> [W]hile I am happy to concede that there are benefits to be obtained from some forms of privatisation of public services, these benefits are widely rehearsed and sometimes exaggerated, while the costs, and I mean primarily social costs, are systematically neglected. (Ball, 2004, p. 2)

For Ball, the greater freedom and flexibility afforded by a release from bureaucracy was somewhat illusory and downplayed important aspects of real situations. He stressed that, "[m]arkets, of any kind, are complex phenomena. They are multi-faceted, untidy, often unpredictable and both creative and destructive" (2007, p. 66).

In *Education PLC*, Ball outlined his definition of education's commodification:

> [a] key facet of the destructiveness/creativity of reform – [which made] transformation possible by re-working forms of service, social relations and public processes into forms that are measurable and thus contractable or marketable" (2007, p. 24).

Ball claimed that much of the legitimation for the privatisation of education came from deliberate derision of the public sector, such that a "great deal of rhetorical effort and discursive work are expended on ensuring that the public sector is portrayed as ineffective, unresponsive, sloppy, risk-averse and innovation-resistant (except when it is not)" (2007, p. 3). Privatisation was driven by "a shift from government to governance, a move from hierarchy to the greater significance of networks and 'self-organisation' or autonomy and responsibility as alternatives to the failures of both social planning and free markets" (ibid., p. 9). Echoing a point drawn out at the end of *Chapter 2*, he attacked underlying theoretical assumptions and characterised this direction of travel as ideologically inconsistent:

> The complex tangle of initiatives and strategies and subsidiarities of post-neo-liberal policy-making is particularly significant in education policy within the general orientation to competitiveness on the one hand and development of networks and partnerships on the other and the role of 'experimentation' in both (ibid., p. 10).

He also pointed out that incentives for private engagement were not straightforward and that public sector work was not necessarily profitable (ibid., p. 38).

Confronting the underlying justifications for privatisation, Ball argued that notions of market and bureaucracy were not necessarily inconsistent with each other; they could be considered as two poles of a continuum (ibid., p. 102). If education was seen as a market, then its "economic value and its

contribution to international market competitiveness" became the dominant measures of its success. Ball claimed that this view resulted in education providers reducing the highly involved, human process of education into a, "set of standardised and measurable products." He claimed that this would irrevocably change the, "meaning and experience of education", and warned against it being seen simply as reform, which obscured a, "process of social transformation" (ibid., pp. 185-187).

More recently, Ball has turned his attention away from particular policies, as in *Beachside*, or how policy functioned, as in his 'policy sociology', to the actors, both individual and organisational, involved in making policy. For Ball, in some senses policy *itself* has become commodified: "Think tanks are often 'do tanks'" (Ball & Exley, 2011, p. 109).

Ball's analysis of privatisation is inescapable for Midvotech, an organisation which is by definition part of the very privatisation he is so suspicious of. Ball outlines a clear and highly compelling perspective, but Midvotech is also a real and specific "complex phenomen[on] … multi-faceted, untidy, often unpredictable and both creative and destructive" (Ball, 2007, p. 66). In fact, many of Ball's concerns around the alliance of education and business are echoed by Midvotech managers, as explained in *Chapter 5*.

Whilst Ball provided a clear perspective on policy-practice debates, his thinking reached an illuminative limit for Midvotech; the organisation was on the wrong side of his argument. This highlights one of the ways Badiou showed promise. Badiou seemed able to process contradiction differently. Ball could not *include* Midvotech in the way that Badiou seemed able to, with the latter's insistence on radical equality.

Alain Badiou

After *Chapter 5* has explored the Midvotech data using Ball, *Chapter 6* re-views the data through the philosophical lens of Alain Badiou, using Badiou's notion of the subject, extended out to his 'figures of the subject'. There are a number of necessary steps to arrive at that point, because Badiou's philosophy makes most sense as an inter-related system. This should become clearer over the remainder of this chapter, which is devoted to the building blocks of Badiou's system up to and including his distinctive notion of

subjecthood. This section on Badiou concludes with a brief survey of how he has been used in education.

The work of Alain Badiou is vast and often complex and very demanding. Another challenge is that much of his thinking reaches the English-speaking world through translation from the original French. Notwithstanding any effects of translation, there is a range of distinct registers across Badiou's prolific output; from rigorous, often mathematical and difficult theory, through analysis of poetry, to plays, fictional prose, polemics, essays and even children's books. Despite the volume of his written output, he has contributed little on education (Bartlett, 2006, p. 143 Notes 9), even though he is a seasoned and accomplished lecturer, including a professorship at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris.

There is a philosophical resonance between Ball and Badiou through the work of Foucault, in that the work of both Foucault and Badiou occupies a place in poststructuralist continental philosophy. However, this is a broad category and key distinctions between Foucault's and Badiou's poststructuralisms underpin a fundamentally different orientation. These differences hinge on Badiou's refusal to accept the poststructuralist annihilation of the subject, and consequently his unique position on the nature of truth.

Badiou is no less critical than Ball of privatisation, which he identified as an inevitable aspect of negative global consequences of the logic of capitalism:

> Widely acknowledged as being of key importance, the crisis in education is only just beginning. The process of dismantlement, privatization, social segregation, and educational inadequacy are going to accelerate (Badiou, 2017, p. 66).

Badiou argues for the possibility of human agency in the face of the grim prospect of a future in the grip of the negative consequences of capitalism. His philosophical system is concerned with how newness is possible. So, whilst sharing Ball's despair in response to the ravages of neoliberalism, he offers a next step, a potential way forward. He insists that this next step emerges spontaneously, and, radically inclusive, does not depend on the status or situation of any individual involved in the process of change set in motion by his elusive event.

With respect to Midvotech, whilst it seems perverse to claim that a private enterprise can contribute in any way to a positive educational future in light of Ball's critique, there is nothing in Badiou which discounts this as a possibility. This argument rests on Badiou's radical inclusivity, his notion of difference. If there could be a single-sentence summary of Badiou's work, it would need to include how "the principle of radical equality" (Badiou, 2013b, p. 25) defines his work.

On a personal level, I found Badiou very easy to misunderstand. This was often as a result of his "eccentric vocabulary" (Robinson, 2010, p. 29). He attaches particular meanings to common words in his system of thought, such as 'situation', 'event', 'truth' and 'subject'. This was a real challenge, but the nominations are carefully chosen and the common meaning is, in fact, an important aspect of the 'updated' Badiouian meaning (Badiou, 1988, p. 97).

The rest of this chapter sets out the relevant principal parts of Badiou's philosophical system, using his 'eccentric vocabulary' as a guide.

Manifesto for Philosophy

Badiou's philosophical project began in mathematics. He is perhaps most famous for insisting that "mathematics *is* ontology" (2005a, p. 4, original emphasis). This 3-word thesis was the basis of his first major philosophical book, *Being and Event*, published in French as *L'être et L'événement* in 1988, 17 years before Oliver Feltham's English translation was published. Although the reference to earlier seminal philosophical works is clear – Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* – Badiou made it clear in the introduction that his book occupied a space with a less than obvious relationship to philosophy. "However radical this thesis might be, all it does is *delimit* the proper space of philosophy" (ibid., p. 15, original emphasis).

Badiou claimed that philosophy was *conditioned* by an 'event' in art, science, love or politics (2008). Glossing over what he meant by an event for now, in a sense, Badiou limited the function of philosophy to commentary and analysis *after* a real-world occurrence.

Badiou described himself as a Platonist, against the majority of his contemporaries; "Everybody hates Plato, except for me" (2013b, p. 12).

Through Plato, Badiou philosophically reengaged with metaphysics, although some would disagree. Metaphysics was possible through mathematics and its ability to think the unthinkable, for example the concept of the void set or infinity, explained later.

Badiou refused the narrative of the end of philosophy, and, directly referencing Lyotard, pointed out the contradiction in the notion:

> It is never really modest to declare an 'end', a completion, a radical impasse. The announcement of the 'End of Grand Narratives' is as immodest as the Grand Narrative itself, the certainty of the 'end of metaphysics' proceeds within the metaphysical element of certainty (1999, pp. 30-31).

Even though he denied an end to philosophy, Badiou redefined philosophy's remit. He relegated philosophy to the service of the conditions of philosophy; art, science, politics and love (2008). The downgrading of philosophy was therefore the price of its continued existence, especially in its metaphysical form.

Badiou has cultivated a unique position. With his thinking so significantly at odds with so many of his contemporaries, he is not without critics, often sparking lively debate. His insistence on the mathematical underpinning of reality and consequent limiting of the scope of philosophy has earned him the charge of 'non-philosopher' from one critic, who dubbed his "[m]athematizing materialism" as 'philo-fiction' (Laruelle, 2013, p. 208).

Equally, though, Badiou has attracted high praise for his conceptual accomplishments:

> Badiou is perhaps the only serious rival of Deleuze and Derrida for that meaningless but unavoidable title of 'most important contemporary French philosopher,' and his major treatise, [Being and Event], is certainly the most ambitious and most compelling single philosophical work written in France since Sartre's [Critique of Dialectical Reason] (Hallward, 2003, p. xxi).

Set Theory

Returning to the starting point and core claim of *Being and Event*, it is important to appreciate Badiou's use of mathematics. For Badiou,

mathematics is the basis of science, one of the 'conditions' of philosophy. Discoveries in mathematics feed into philosophy, and not the other way around. According to Badiou, and presumably unlike philosophy, mathematics is, "recognized as having a certain capacity for thinking 'first principles'" (2008, chap. 7).

In *Being and Event*, Badiou used mathematics in the form of post-Cantorian set theory. This particular branch of mathematics was significant in that it could be used to derive all other branches of mathematics, thereby holding a fundamental status. The 'set' was the principal concept, with features relevant to the wider argument in this study.

For me, the term 'set theory' called up memories from school, which included Venn diagrams, depictions of interlocking circles or ovals which were intended to help organise thinking of the membership of different elements to different sets. In the simple example in Figure 2, the number 44 belongs to Set A, but not to Set B, whereas the number 37 belongs to both sets.

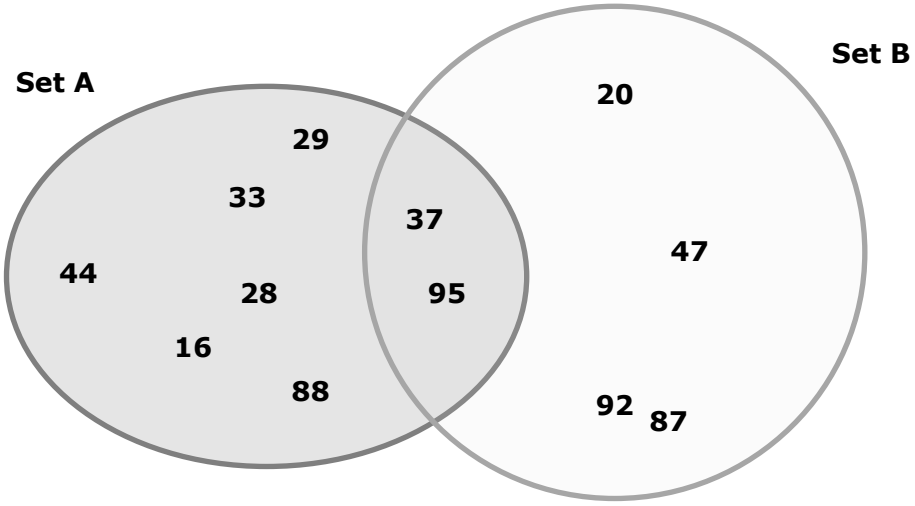


Figure 2: A simple Venn diagram

A mathematical set is *defined* by its elements. Any number of different elements are considered together as an entity, a set. Note, however, that the thinking of set-as-entity is merely a scaffolding device. A set itself does not actually exist as an entity; it has no particular 'being' of its own, as some-*thing* called a set. In fact, other than the place-holder name 'set', it is nameless. This is crucial to understanding Badiou's system.

The unfortunate consequence of conceiving a set as a coloured circle or oval at school was that it encouraged the thinking of an entity 'containing' certain elements, as some sort of enclosure. Also unhelpfully, in Venn diagrams, these elements tended to be of a particular type; numbers, as in the diagram above, or words, for example.

Crucially, mathematics has no requirement for existence, as a circle on a page does. Mathematics is pure thinking, pure inscription, which is Badiou's point.

To recap, a mathematical set is *defined* by its elements. Two specific examples reinforce this key point. Remember the 'rule' is that *any number* of elements define a particular set. The first example is the singular special case of a set with *no* elements, the void set. This special type of nothingness is difficult, if not actually impossible, to visualise, but is entirely possible to think through mathematics, using simple principles. The second example is the idea of an *infinite* set, again impossible to think without mathematics, which has no inherent problem with infinity. In fact, the mathematical conceptualisation of infinity was Cantor's revelation, leading to the development of set theory in the first place.

With respect to the Midvotech study, Badiou's mathematical focus and my own, admittedly partial, appreciation of set theory were part of what originally motivated my use of Badiou. This grew from trying to make sense of what it meant to be a subcontracted organisation. The partially in and partially out status, from the perspective of a subcontracted partner, naturally called to mind something like a Venn diagram; a thinking tool to consider which elements were part of which larger entities – state, FE sector, lead provider, subcontractor, and so on.

Other aspects of the fundamentals of set theory useful here, as well as the inexistence of sets themselves demonstrated above, the idea of mathematical truth is also important. As mentioned above, the 'rule' that elements *define* a set is the basis of set theory. This rule is *axiomatic*, or definitional. It is simply a decision. As it happens, this decision – this 'invented' rule – turns out to be very fruitful for mathematics, and the field of set theory and its successors are still unfolding. This is one ingredient of Badiou's subject, explored a little later on.

Presentation and Representation

Rooted in mathematical set theory, Badiou's position is that all elements of sets, or 'multiples', are themselves multiple. Reality itself is in and of itself inconsistent multiplicity, knowable only through mathematics. Badiou claimed that the history of philosophy had been based on the formulation: "what *presents* itself is essentially multiple; *what* presents itself is essentially one" (2005a, p. 23, original emphasis). The phenomenal world is clearly multiple, verifiable at any moment by any sensible person. However, the nature of being-as-such is often assumed to be singular, but beyond direct experience. This is where Badiou makes a fundamental and radical departure. For him, being-as-such is *multiple*, and – also beyond direct experience – unchanging. Change, according to Badiou is part of the phenomenal world only:

> My position is that the change is not in fact on the side of ontological multiplicity but on the side of the relationship between some multiples. So the change is a relational determination and not a purely ontological determination. There exists relations between some levels only in the particular world. So change is not a property of being as such, change is a property of being when it is localized in a world (2013b, pp. 43-44).

Once a multiple is 'presented', its inconsistency is resolved; it becomes consistent. According to Badiou, "every situation is structured" (2005a, p. 24) in this way. Whilst consistent, a presented multiple is likely still infinite, as for many, if not all, multiples or sets describing the real world (Bartlett, 2006, p. 131).

Badiou termed the totality of the aspects of a particular situation which are represented, or *counted,* as "the state of the situation" (2005a, part II); what is *known*, with deliberate and conspicuous ambiguity in his use of the word 'state'.

> The state's concern is always with the parts or subsets of a situation since, elements being simply what they are, it is only the configuration of a situation's parts that can open the way to a radical transformation of that situation (Hallward, 2003, p. 96).

This point relates to the notion of control, which became an important theme in the Midvotech study, explored in *Chapter 5* and revisited in *Chapter 6*.

Even though there are always more parts (or subsets) than elements (or multiples), the parts are in effect abstracted, or more global, compared to local. Badiou noted that, "We know, thanks in particular to mathematics, that … the local status of problems is often more difficult and muddled than their global status" (1988, p. 93). This local-global distinction becomes important later, but for now, note the resonance here with the call in the FE literature for more local control, for example in Avis's localism.

A Real-world Example

An example relating to Midvotech may help elucidate some of the above rather abstract points, and at the same time demonstrate the relevance of Badiou to the site.

From the perspective of the state, Midvotech is little more than a subcontracted relationship with a lead provider. The lead provider is the 'recognised' entity; it is *included*. Midvotech to some extent does not exist for the state. In set-theoretical terms, although it is an *element*, it is not *part* of the situation.

From the lead provider's perspective, Midvotech can be understood as a department of the college, however oddly shaped and organised with respect to other college departments. For Midvotech students, despite completing college enrolment forms, most do not recognise the college as the provider of their learning experiences, because their direct involvement is wholly with Midvotech. Although a small number of applicants are referred from the college each year, the vast majority approach Midvotech directly. Midvotech staff are employed by Midvotech and generally have little contact with the college, depending on their role.

So, whilst Midvotech is clearly a stable physical presence, its identity is more difficult to locate, unlike the college, which is more or less consistently 'visible' to the state, as well as its students and its staff. This identity diffusion is exacerbated for Midvotech by being part of a group of companies, the clients of which may well be oblivious to the existence of Midvotech as an FE provider.

This relates also to the difficulty in defining FE in a stable way, described in relation to the literature, in *Chapter 2*, a strong indicator of which is that FE has had various nominations that fall in and out of favour over time. The preferred identifier for FE changes over time, depending whether the focus or agenda is post-compulsory, skills, vocational or lifelong education and training, each of which has a distinct purpose or mission. The umbrella definition of 'further education' simply places FE between elementary (i.e. compulsory schooling) and advanced (i.e. university specialism and mastery).

This double liminality for subcontracted FE means that organisations like Midvotech occupy multiple 'worlds' simultaneously. This made Badiou attractive for the study, because his philosophical project is founded on putting mathematical concepts to work in philosophy, for example his use of set theory. Simultaneous multi-dimensionality raises curiosity rather than confusion for a mathematician. This was a principal and highly productive insight for Badiou, who was himself trained as a mathematician.

Mathematics enabled the ability to think from 'first principles'; what was a difficult and indistinct knot of double liminality could be relatively straightforwardly thought as a set, which was simply a way of thinking a collection of elements. Remember that a set itself has no particular existence of its own, it has no name; it is *defined* by its elements, it is merely the 'count-as-one'. A different collection of elements would define a different set, irrespective of how many elements were different, from a single element to every one of them. This is the principle of extensionality (Badiou, 2005a, pp. 60-61).

Remember that for Badiou, mathematics is the realm of thinking and being; "mathematics *is* ontology" (2005a, p. 4, original emphasis). This is because "mathematical symbolism … is neither temporal nor spacial" (2013b, p. 54). In contrast, Badiou defined a 'situation' (2005a, p. 24), and later 'world' (2009a) to mean spacio-temporal actuality, the place where experience takes place. "We have no knowledge of being, we only have a thinking about being" (2013b, p. 56).

In the 'world' of FE, elements – for example, state, college, Midvotech, staff, students – inter-relate in various ways. Each element has a relationship, however close or distant, with every other, along a continuum of relative

significance. These relationships are always with respect to the particular 'world' in question. From a Badiouian perspective, this is why it is problematic that the 'world' of FE is so poorly defined, to the extent that elements are either included or not, and sometimes invisible, depending whether aspects of FE are considered to 'count' or not. Midvotech is therefore a subset of FE; recognised by the lead provider, but not by the state.

The above is a straightforward example of the effect of Badiou's approach, which, for me, appears to both accept without question, but also somehow neatly sidesteps, overwhelming complexity, leading to a sort of clarity.

A supplementary example relates to the research process itself. My leader-insider-researcher status brought a number of role conflicts into existence. Different roles were *included* in different worlds, even though they all *belonged* to me. I brought different levels and aspects of academia into Midvotech at different times. I tried *not* to bring my leadership role into the interview context. However, it was often impossible to exist cleanly inside or outside of any particular role.

Simply put, the above concerns and analyses were of the realm of *being*, but because of the gap between belonging and inclusion, were unstable or contradictory. Such instability was the potential opening for an *event*, with respect to Badiou's distinction between *being* and *event*.

Event

Returning now to what Badiou means by 'event', if a situation or a world describes what *is*, then the event describes an occurrence, something which is not represented in the situation; the event "*is* not, but it does *happen*" (Robinson, 2010, p. 32, original emphasis). The event therefore occupies the dimension of the verb, rather than the noun, and in doing so invokes the need to think time. According to Bartlett an event is "that for which ontology cannot account – the irruption of the 'new' in being" (Bartlett, 2006, p. 132).

Events are unusual, rare. For example, Badiou recognised Cantor's invention of set theory as an event in science, specifically in mathematics. In art, he claimed that Schoenberg's invention of serialism, deliberately breaking the rules of tonality, was an event in music. In politics, according to Badiou, the

French Revolution was an event. Badiou claimed that falling in love could be an event for the individuals involved. Here we have all four 'conditions' of philosophy – science, art, politics, and love – which, for Badiou, were the potential sites of an event. Some commentators have declared that Badiou's radical approach was itself an event: "Badiou's philosophy of the 'event' has itself become an event of sorts for contemporary social and political theory" (Barbour, 2010, p. 251).

Robinson described a political event as "a phenomenon at or outside the boundaries of expectation and legitimacy." He also offered the insight that significant biographical *events*, for example births, deaths, and love encounters, tended to invite social ceremonies, "which seek to reintegrate into the steady order of the community by demarcating their extraordinary nature" (Robinson, 2010, p. 33).

Badiou set out a clear and rigorous mathematical explanation of the event in *Being and Event*. Something that disobeys the rules might be assumed to be impenetrable to the highly ordered gaze of mathematics. However, Badiou showed that the illegal excess of the event *could* be explained using the distinction between *belonging* and *inclusion* (2005a, pp. 81-92, Meditation 7).

Elements *belong* to a set, which is just another way of thinking the definition of a set. A set is constituted by the elements that belong to it. Belonging is therefore the core definitional principle of set theory. A set also contains subsets, which are combinations of elements. Hallward offered the real-world example of an army platoon (Hallward, 2003, pp. 99-100), which was *included* in the army, but, like any set, was not a thing; it was not itself a soldier. Because there are so many possible combinations of elements, creating subsets of a set, there is always an excess of inclusion (of subsets) over belonging (of elements). In the real world, this excess is infinite, and therefore uncountable. "The uncountable excess of subsets over elements points to a constitutional instability in securing once and for all that of which a multiple consists" (Robinson, 2010, p. 38). According to Badiou, it is this 'constitutional instability' that makes an event possible.

Truth

Badiou is a materialist. In the preface to *Logics of Worlds*, his second major philosophical work, he proposed the term *democratic materialism* for the claim that, "*There are only bodies and languages*" (Badiou, 2009a, p. 1, original emphasis). However, as well as being a materialist, he had rescued metaphysics from the ashes in his refusal to accept the end of philosophy, as explained above. He therefore 'supplemented' the maxim of democratic materialism to give the following, paradoxical, formulation:

> *There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths* (Badiou, 2009a, p. 4, original emphasis).

Badiou proposed the term *materialist dialectic* for this formulation, distinct from the *dialectical materialism* ('diamat') of traditional Marxism.

At odds with contemporary notions of truth, "Badiou asserts the authority of 'universal truths', or absolute principles that exceed the circulation of opinions within a given situation"; truths that existed outside of existing conceptions, metaphorically 'off-grid'. In a world where objective truth is difficult to defend, Badiou "attacks the longstanding 'pluralism' and 'relativism' of contemporary theory" (Barbour, 2010, p. 252). For Badiou, universal objective truth was real. For Badiou, a truth was "a hazardous supplement [which] interrupts repetition" (2004, p. 112).

According to Badiou, truths are "endowed with a transworldly and universal value", making them distinct from opinions, which have value in only a single world (2011, p. 22). Badiou used the word 'world' more recently to mean any stable-state situation. He used the term 'situation' earlier in *Being and Event* to mean the same thing.

Badiou set out an extended and rigorous mathematical description of a truth in *Being and Event*, where he defined truth as a 'generic set', based on the work of mathematician Paul Cohen (2005a, part VII). A generic set was described by Badiou as a "monster" (2013b, p. 19); something impossible that *should* not, but did exist. He showed in *Being and Event* that it *could* exist. In simple terms, set theory defined the 'count-as-one', but without defining what was being counted. For example, there could be a set of all

humans, all people resident in Britain, all pets, all four-legged pets, all stars or all edible substances. All of these sets would be considered *constructible*, after the logician Gödel (ibid., p. 18), even though some might be infinite. With a specific property in mind, one could construct a set of all edible substances, for example, at least in theory. The 'monster' of the generic set was exceptional. It was – impossibly - *non*-constructible. It had no definable property. It was "a little bit of everything" (Watkin, 2017, p. 212).

Subject

To complete this brief tour of the essential elements of Badiou's system, the remaining definition is Badiou's subject, which is key to understanding *Chapter 6*. Even though *Theory of the Subject* was Badiou's first substantial philosophical book, first published in French in 1982 (2009b), his 'subject' was the last to appear in his philosophical system. Badiou has managed to recover the subject from its annihilation through poststructuralist deconstruction (Bosteels, 2011, p. 202). Badiou's conception of the subject has perhaps been his key philosophical innovation, lending his philosophy the peculiar ability to shed light on what seem to be intractable dilemmas through other lenses. Beginning with his distinction between being and event, which are fundamentally incompatible - one could not be used to describe the other in any sense – *Badiou's subject exists on the side of the event.* On the side of being is merely the 'human animal'. What *is* is the human animal. What *happens* is the realm of the subject.

Badiou's subject emerges from, or in some sense is created by, an event. According to Badiou, an event is actually the spontaneous appearance of a truth in a world, which disappears straight away because the appearance of a truth is impossible; a 'monster', a generic set. The event leaves a trace that is perceived by a subject, who becomes convinced that the event took place; something that could not be known for certain. That the event is 'undecidable' in this way is, paradoxically, an indication of its event-ness (2004, p. 110).

It is therefore always unclear that an event *took place*, past tense. Equally unclear is what the consequence of an event *will be*, future tense. A subject can only fully appreciate a truth in hindsight; "The proper verb tense for ''truth'' as Badiou uses it is neither the present nor the past, but rather the

future anterior" (Heyer, 2009, p. 442). The future anterior, or future perfect, tense identifies the past at a future time, something which will have been.

Badiou claimed that his subject is an active participant in working out the consequences of an event, in a series of chance 'experiments' defined as a 'truth procedure' (2004, pp. 153-160). Besana designated 'subject as sequence': "a subject is defined as a series of actions that progressively unfold the consequences of an event", for me, breaking the 'natural' identification of subjecthood with personhood (2015, p. 323). The subject need not be an individual; it could be a group or other entity capable of instigating change.

'Fidelity' to a truth is the catalyst for change (Strhan, 2010, p. 236). Using the example of the conversion of Saint Paul, Strhan used a conception of 'grace' to clarify that the subject was not a subject by choice but chose to act in fidelity to the event.

Badiou used the term 'truth procedure' or 'generic procedure' to describe the subject's working out of the consequences of an event, point by point. He maintained that true novelty, associated with the most radical form of change, one that changes the world itself, always followed this process.

Badiou claimed that his explanation of a truth procedure was rooted in experience, rather than theory, evidenced in numerous examples in his *Logics of Worlds* (2009a). This was an important aspect of Badiou's work, which connected with Ball's interest in how theory related to practice, identified in the first half of this chapter. For Ball, theory was necessary but 'violent' (Ball, 2010).

Ethics

There are important consequences of Badiou's theory of the subject, relevant to Midvotech, summarised in this and the following section.

Badiou wrote his book on ethics (2002) in response to the interest in the notion of 'human rights' at the time. Rather than focus on the 'rights' aspect of 'human rights', Badiou attended to what it was to be 'human', rather than merely a human animal. In Badiou's system, a 'faithful subject' was a vital

part of the process of truth. In fact, it was the faithful subject that actively built a truth, part by part, piece by piece, which eventually became part of the accepted 'encyclopaedia of the situation' or a 'new present'. Something recognisably new *will* thereby *have been* created, at some future point in time; future perfect tense. The beginning of this process for Badiou was an event, an 'illegal' supplement to a situation, which happened by chance. The faithful subject, for Badiou, was fully human, a human-ness related to *any* individual's ability to become a subject.

Badiou's injunction to "Keep going!" (Heyer, 2009, p. 442) applied to the faithful subject. However, someone might believe they had been witness to an event but be mistaken. Badiou gave this instance the name 'terror'. A faithful subject might abandon the labour of the truth process, which Badiou called 'betrayal'. Finally, a faithful subject might come to believe the truth process they were involved in to be total, overestimating its importance. This was named 'disaster' by Badiou. According to Badiou, then, the figure of the faithful subject could succumb to any of the three 'evils' of terror, betrayal or disaster (2002, p. 71).

Badiou used the well-known allegory of Plato's cave as an explanatory device to elucidate his 'truth process'. We have already seen that Badiou described himself as a Platonist, although, "a sophisticated Platonist, not a vulgar one" (2011, p. 26). That he published his own translation of Plato's Republic (2012) is testament to his commitment. In a series of lectures for the European Graduate School (EGS), Badiou used Plato's cave to respond to a question about organisations; especially relevant to the Midvotech study. He described the question as 'topological', concerning the inside and the outside, with the spectre of 'professionalism' inside an organisation calling for a *de facto* silence or collusion in an oppressive regime. Using the allegory of the cave, Badiou suggested that the way out of the cave could only be achieved in two steps. Firstly, by "becoming convinced that it is not true that the state holds the key to all possibilities" and then to leave the cave with the help of an event; "something which occurs as a dysfunction of the inside" (2013b, pp. 60-61). According to Badiou, *all* institutions are oppressive by their very nature.

This cluster of notions brings Badiou into sharper focus for the Midvotech study. Badiou's comment about professionalism relates to one of the key

themes in the FE literature. Like set theory, Plato's cave was a useful device for thinking Midvotech as private subcontracted organisation. Covered all too briefly above, Badiou's approach to ethics was tantalising as a possible navigational aid for organisations like Midvotech. Could Badiou's ethics provide the missing ethical dimension to Ball's critique of privatisation?

Figures of the Subject

Another consequence of Badiou's subject relevant to Midvotech is around the faithful subject's encounter with others. If there were different modes of subjecthood in relation to a notion of ethics, perhaps there were multiple subjects in conflict with each other.

Badiou defined his subject in *Being and Event* as a singular entity, even though it could be multiple; a group of people with a common cause, or a particular demographic, for example. In his later work his subject became the 'faithful subject', to distinguish it from other figures of the subject. According to Badiou, the appearance of a 'faithful subject' made possible the existence of two other subjects, the 'reactive subject' and the 'obscure subject' (Besana, 2015). This formulation proved to be a fruitful lens to interrogate the Midvotech data.

Badiou's faithful subject is faithful to an event. His faithful subject believes that an event had occurred and actively works to realise its consequences, in the process creating a 'new present'. The two other figures of the subject oppose the creation of this new present in different ways.

The reactive subject is a conservative figure that "maintains that the previous world can and should go on as it is", often instigating reforms to the pre-existing order to ensure continuation, through the "*invention of new conservative practices*" (Badiou, 2011, pp. 94-95).

The obscure subject denies the faithful subject through the imposition of a fictitious body – for example, "a Race, a Culture, a Nation or a God" (Badiou, 2011, p. 96) – to annihilate the 'new present'.

Badiou claimed the importance of his figures of the subject in a wider frame. For him, "History is always the imbrication of the three subjective types"

(2011, p. 98). Using this idea, the way Midvotech developed over time could be seen as the interplay of tensions between figures of the subject, explored later in *Chapter 6*.

Badiou and Education

The final part of this exploration of Badiou's philosophical system is a brief addendum to *Chapter 2*, now the reference points used by Badiou scholars are more familiar. It was noted earlier that education has not been a significant focus of Badiou's work to date. The little Badiou explicitly wrote consists of one gnomic sentence in his book on pedagogy and the arts:

> Art is pedagogical for the simple reason that it produces truths and because "education" (save in its oppressive or perverted expressions) has never meant anything but this: to arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them (2005b, p. 9).

A few pages later in the same book Badiou reminded us:

> let us recall that the only education is an education *by* truths. The entire, insistent problem is that there be truths, without which the philosophical category of truth is entirely empty and the philosophical act nothing but an academic quibble (Badiou, 2005b, pp. 14-15).

This second comment served to accentuate the importance of 'truth' in the first. The key phrase 'an education by truths' became the subtitle of a book exploring the relationship between Badiou and Plato (Bartlett, 2011). Bartlett questioned *which* truths might be employed to educate, which "values to be inculcated through the methods of state pedagogy" (2006, p. 141).

Explained earlier, 'truth' for Badiou has a particular meaning and is at the heart of his philosophy. Moreover, he insists that truth has no place in knowledge. Truth is a process, *at odds* with established knowledge, or "the encyclopaedia of the situation" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 327). "[T]ruth is not a qualification of knowledge nor an intuition of the intelligible … [it is] indiscernible within knowledge." This is why it makes sense for truth, defined in this way, to 'pierce a hole' in knowledge. Badiou's truth is "so completely

recast as to go well beyond the critique of correspondence theories of truth, and to out-radicalize hermeneutics of unveiling" (Badiou, 1988, p. 94).

Despite Badiou's own relative silence on education, a number of scholars have explored his relevance to education. The existing literature is small, contained mostly in a single special issue (Heyer et al., 2010), contributions to which made use of Badiou's ideas of subject, truth and equality.

For Kent den Heyer, the consequences of an educational event, or truth-process, defined a becoming subject to learning:

> [E]ducation begins where the teacher and student seek to become subject to a truth-process. In maintaining fidelity to such a process, teachers and students are 'becoming subject' to their learning and, thus, to their living" (Heyer, 2009, p. 460).

Heyer reported a worrying "prevalence of youth despair" (2009, p. 444) and called for radical change, rather than the illusion of "a perpetual unfolding of more and more of this" (David G. Smith 2000, cited in Heyer, 2009, p. 445). Heyer redefined education as 'affirmative invention' (ibid., p. 443), a proposed remedy for his students' dark vision of the future.

Equality in education was explored by Barbour, using Badiou's ethics. According to Barbour, "ethics has nothing to do with being exposed to, or troubled by, the infinite alterity of the other" (2010, pp. 253-254), alterity was a given. There was no discrimination between those who might become subject to an event. Barbour forged a link between the organisation in the classroom and Badiou's suggestion for political action, whereby subjects should be "[o]rganized in anticipation of surprises" (Badiou 2005d, cited in Barbour, 2010, p. 257).

Strhan focussed on Badiou's subject, using St Paul to illuminate education, which:

> references a process of subjectivity in that education involves truth piercing through established forms of knowledges and the subject's subsequent re-appropriation of those structures of knowledge in light of the event (2010, pp. 235-236).

Strhan employed Badiou to highlight the need for a particular conception of 'space' and 'grace' in teaching and learning to counter "the seeming obliteration of truth by management" (ibid., pp. 247-249). If truth was being obliterated by management, and education was 'by truths', then management was also obliterating 'education'. Strhan's essay echoed Ball's concerns for education, as well as concerns voiced by Midvotech managers, explored in *Chapter 6*.

Summary

The consensus view in the FE literature is that frequent shifts in policy impact on FE and are at the heart tensions in the sector. One key question in the Midvotech study was to what extent this was also true for a private FE subcontracted organisation. Ball is perhaps *the* authority on educational policy in the UK, describing his own work as policy sociology, and this chapter summarised his main ideas and approaches used to frame the Midvotech research project.

Foucault was one of the earliest critics of neoliberalism and, extending his critique, Ball warned that neoliberalism incorporated, intentionally or not, elements of undesirable social transformation, which he claimed caused irreparable damage to education. Ball identified three inter-related 'policy technologies' which worked together to contribute to an overarching reform agenda; marketisation, managerialism and performativity.

Marketisation recast education as a commodity, increasing competition between providers. Managerialism borrowed HR practices from the commercial business world to help compete effectively in the newly created education market. Performativity instigated measures to gauge success.

Paraphrasing Ball, *value* was in danger of replacing *values* under this policy reform package. Redefining education as a market introduced new players through outsourcing and other partnership arrangements and Ball was scathing of this privatisation of education. He warned of the risks of loosening the meaning of education as a public service, often justified through the caricature of overly-bureaucratic institutions. For Ball, the boundary between private and public had been dangerously blurred.

Although Ball's *Education PLC* (2007) focussed mainly on the UK schools sector, plausibly translating many of the points into FE was straightforward and many phenomena were visible in the FE literature as well as in the Midvotech data. Ball's work supported the thinking of UK FE and served as an authoritative position on privatisation in education. Badiou could not contribute to either of these strands, with so little of his prolific commentary directed at education, let alone UK education. However, Badiou could provide a framework for thinking complexity and contradiction, of which there was no shortage in FE, as well as more locally in Midvotech.

Ball articulated a compelling and expert critique, with associated warnings, but he also conceded, "that there are benefits to be obtained from some forms of privatisation of public services" (Ball, 2004, p. 2). However, he was not explicit *which* specific forms of privatisation contributed positively.

The key move in this thesis is to re-articulate Midvotech as part of a Badiouian 'truth procedure', with Kirsten playing the part of Badiou's 'subject'. The *possibility* of a new ethical framework, missing from Ball, is opened up in Badiou's ethics. To appreciate how Badiou contributes to the Midvotech study in this way, it is necessary to understand his notion of 'subject', which was built up in this chapter through the related fundamentals of Badiou's system, including his approach to philosophy, use of set theory and how he defines presentation and representation. His set-theoretical concepts of *belonging* and *inclusion* were explained with reference to Midvotech and its part in FE, constituting my initial attraction to Badiou's philosophy.

Armed with the parts of Badiou's system relevant to Midvotech, there was a brief review of how others have applied his thinking in education, belatedly completing *Chapter 2*. As in the Midvotech study, Badiou scholars have also used his notions of 'truth' and 'subject' but applied more to theories of learning. Badiou scholars in education have gravitated towards the clearly strong relationship between Badiou's notion of a process of truth and the process of learning. After the detailed explanation of the research process in the next chapter, notions from Ball and Badiou outlined in this chapter will be used to frame *Chapters 5* and *6*, respectively.

Chapter 4: The Research Process

This chapter elucidates the research process, beginning with an outline of the methodology and research design; the aim, research questions, the research approach, ontology and epistemology. The research methods are explained, as intended in the design and planning, but also how the research actually happened. Research ethics and positionality are discussed, relating some of the complexities of multiple and conflicting roles as leader-insider-researcher, including a discussion of the role of power relations in the study. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the research process and my role in it.

Methodology

As a senior manager of Midvotech, there were important practical and pragmatic aspects to the choice of research site. Similar to many EdD studies, the research had to be built around my own workplace and work commitments. The single aim of the research project was:

- To reveal a private provider in UK FE in order to contribute a voice from subcontracted FE provision, a perspective almost completely absent from the literature.

The study sought to respond to two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent do changes in policy impact Midvotech?
RQ2: To what extent can Badiou contribute to understanding Midvotech?

Case study method was chosen to explore the case of Midvotech, with two embedded units of analysis; an unstructured interview with Kirsten, and formal interviews with a number of Midvotech managers. The project was not a straightforward case study, though, both in design and reality. My position as leader-insider-researcher served to undermine the clarity of the case, due to my own influence on the research site resulting from my leadership role.

There were originally three RQs. Originally the first question, 'How does a private provider in FE respond to change?' was excluded when I realised that

whilst it was important, change was actually in many ways the *proxy* through which I could explore the other two questions. By building up a picture of how change happened at Midvotech through managers' voices, I aimed to understand how national policy played out in the research site, using Ball, and to find evidence of the veracity of Badiou's philosophy in a real-world setting. More consistently mirroring the thinking behind the research, simplifying to two RQs also helped make the dual and inter-related foci of Ball (RQ1) and Badiou (RQ2) clearer. The scope of the RQs changed over time, finally naming Midvotech in the RQs themselves, rather than the original generic 'private provider in FE'. It became clear that Midvotech was not necessarily representative of other organisations and I was wary of over-claiming on the basis of a single, relatively limited study.

An explicit set of questions on the theme of change were built into the schedule of a series of interviews with managers, shown in *Appendix 1*. There was a deliberate focus on process through the theme of change, away from a simple description and towards a more ethnographic "rich description" (Bazeley, 2013, pp. 376-378). The aim was revelatory; noticing and reporting, rather than attempting to resolve, contradiction.

Staying true to the aim of the research, I was keen that the 'voice' of Midvotech captured was constituted of real voices in a real setting. The study was therefore qualitative in nature, although quantitative data from the research site were available and were utilised to inform contextual thinking. FE is well served by extensive nationwide quantitative data which are freely available online, which were also referenced throughout the project.

To a degree, Badiou's work influenced the methodology, mainly as a result of the impact of his conceptual meditations on my thinking. It would have been inconsistent for the ontological and epistemological frames to be established without reference to him, especially considering the nature of his work. Relating to more usual terms in the methodology literature, Badiou was perhaps closest to a fusion of the 'depth realist' and 'idealist' *ontological assumptions* described by Blaikie (2010, pp. 93-94). Blaikie's depth realist assumes that, "reality is stratified and has ontological depth" and that, "social structures are less enduring and do not exist independently of the activities they influence". This stratification of reality corresponded well to Badiou's view of reality as multiple, explained below.

Blaikie's idealist holds that, "[s]ocial reality is made up of shared interpretations" but, "[i]dealist ontologies take a variety of forms" with differing relationships between constructed realities and an independently existing reality. This is a little more involved, because Badiou claimed a materialist stance, but paradoxically insisted that truths also exist, which are neither bodies nor languages, as explained in the previous chapter in the section on *Truth*. Badiou therefore enabled, "a new synthesis between the rigorous lucidity of materialism and the invincible hope of idealism" (Badiou & Tarby, 2013, p. 154).

The identified fusion of realist and idealist was clearly problematic, but was based on a dialectical logic, rather than assuming them to be incompatible. There are three main elements needed to unpack Badiou's approach to ontology.

Firstly, in *Being and Event*, the term 'ontology' means, "the discourse on being qua being" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 26), which *is* mathematics, according to Badiou. As outlined in *Chapter 3*, the decision that 'mathematics *is* ontology' is the generative kernel of Badiou's whole system.

Secondly, for Badiou, there is no *single* being-as-such; being is *multiple*. There is no 'one'; "the one is *not*" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 23, original emphasis). Set theory does not permit a 'set of all sets', which underpins this decision. "Ontology, insofar as it exists, must necessarily be the science of the multiple qua multiple" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 28). Prior to its presentation, being qua being is inconsistent multiplicity, "the pure inconsistency of being" (Bartlett, 2006, p. 131). Unlike Kant, for whom being-as-such was unknowable, Badiou's ontology *is* knowable - through the science of mathematics, specifically set theory.

Thirdly, pure being, for Badiou, is not subject to change (Badiou, 2013b, p. 44). This, to me at least, surprising conclusion is based on a principle in set theory, the axiom of extensionality. As we saw in *Chapter 3*, a multiple is *defined* by its elements. It therefore takes the absence or presence of only one single element, out of a potentially infinite number, to render the original multiple no longer existent. The ontological realm of the multiple is therefore in some senses quantitative, with no possibility of representing qualitative

distinctions. All or nothing, Badiou described it as a Hamletian universe, to be or not to be, with nothing in between (D GCAS, 2014b).

The approach in the Midvotech study most closely aligns with a constructivist epistemology, which accepts the researcher as an important participant in the research, as co-creator. "When facts are understood to be (wo)man-made, the relationship between the analyst and her facts becomes more complicated" (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p. 197). My own constructivist leaning is exemplified in Korzysbki's claim, which has been a significant influence on my thinking for a number of years. According to Korzybski, *all* mappings and translations are self-reflexive:

> the map *is not* the territory
> no map represents *all* of 'its' presumed territory
> maps are self-reflexive, i.e., we can map our maps indefinitely. Also, every map is *at least*, whatever else it may claim to map, a map of the map-maker: her/his assumptions, skills, world-view, etc. (1994, p. xvii - original emphases).

The above strongly held dictum has been modified through my engagement with Badiou's work, because he takes issue with the constructivist position. Against many constructivists (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p. 165), and paradoxically in some senses constructivism itself, Badiou insists that truths *really* exist, but they were rare. Using their characteristic rarity to make a point, Badiou claimed that *real,* "[c]ommunication is as exceptional a phenomenon as truths are" (Badiou & Tarby, 2013, p. 58).

The above positions taken together most closely constitute a poststructuralist approach, within which interpretations and understandings of agents involved, including myself, are central (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 27-28). According to Stake, in a poststructuralist orientation, "the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (1995, p. 12, original emphasis). Contradiction was a salient feature of the Midvotech data and a poststructuralist approach enabled me to paint a richer picture without forcing the data to fit a theory.

Case Study

A number of formal models of case study were explored during the design of the research. The territory of private subcontracted FE was relatively unexplored, so an 'exploratory' case study in Yin's terminology (2009, pp. 6-7) appeared on the surface to be an appropriate and relevant basic approach. However, this exploration was to yield narrative accounts and I also needed the potential to test theories, for example, around the extent of neoliberalisation at Midvotech, using Ball. These factors aligned with Yin's 'descriptive' and 'explanatory' case-study-types in his triadic taxonomy. A more satisfactory fit was Stake's definition of an 'intrinsic', as opposed to an 'instrumental', study (1995, p. 3), in which the case is interesting in and of itself. That described Midvotech, at least for me. Rather than aiming for generalisability, I agreed with Stake that, "[t]he real business of case study is particularization" (ibid., p. 8).

Given my immersion in the case study context and perhaps natural inclination to understand it more deeply, I wanted to exploit the unusual and privileged access to a new research site. The EdD programme provided the framework and a receptive MD in Kirsten provided the opportunity. Midvotech was potentially therefore Yin's 'revelatory' case within which, "an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyse phenomena previously inaccessible to social science inquiry" (2009, p. 48). Yin explained the 'revelatory' case as a rationale for a single-case design; "[t]he case study is therefore worth conducting because the descriptive information alone will be revelatory" (ibid., p. 49). The revelatory leaning of the study was the key element of its aim, to contribute a previously silent voice to the FE literature.

In summary, the Midvotech project was an embedded single-case study, with multiple units of analysis, both intrinsic in Stake's terms and revelatory in Yin's terms.

My insider status rendered the case study less straightforward. My high regard for Ball's *Beachside* study (1981) was mentioned earlier in *Chapter 3*. Ball was employed as a teacher at Beachside Comprehensive during the study, enabling an insider view. The Midvotech study foregrounded the voice and interpretation of participants as much as possible, reinforcing the study's nature as 'revelatory', including to myself.

The realities of insider-as-researcher are at odds with model case study method, wherein an appropriate case is *chosen* from multiple possibilities. The issue is the notion of a *study*, in some ways irrespective of the methods employed. The insider-researcher cannot enter the research site at the beginning of a project, conduct the research and then exit the site. They are part of the research site before, during and – all being well – after the whole project has concluded. This lent a highly contingent nature to my particular EdD journey, which led to an exploration of potential autoethnographic influences on the Midvotech study.

Denzin, a key figure in autoethnographic method, succinctly pointed out that, "[t]he pronoun *I* is performative" (2014, p. 10, original emphasis), which for me resonated with Badiou's insistence on an essentially axiomatic, rather than definitional, orientation (e.g. Hallward, 2003, p. 228). Midvotech is clearly not an autoethnographic study, but I completely accept my centrality.

However much I tried to allow others their voice, their voice did not pass through the research process unaffected, which, of course, included my own nervous system, itself subject to change over the course of the research. For example, voice tone, tempo and emphasis, influencers of interpretation, or misinterpretation, were all ablated in the reporting. Whilst qualities of voice were captured to an extent in the audio recordings, visual cues and body language were left in the interview room, apart from all too few scribbled observations. This thesis is therefore in some ways 'performed', in Denzin's terms.

Data Collection

The 'revelatory' single-case was Midvotech, but there were multiple units of analysis, aligning the study with Yin's 'embedded' design for case studies (2009, p. 46) along two axes, detailed below. This section details how the data collection phase of the research actually played out, including adjustments and compromises along the way.

Interview with Kirsten

In May 2013, Kirsten agreed to an exploratory interview. Essentially unstructured and lasting almost exactly 1 hour, the interview was based on a single question:

- Where is the [name of group-wide organisation] project going?

Originally intended only to provide some context from the MD, the interview with Kirsten did not explicitly fit into the design of the project. However, data from the interview influenced the couching of questions in the later more formal interviews. Kirsten used the word 'control' more than ten times during her interview, which resonated with notions of change and of policy trajectories already forming in my own thinking of Midvotech from the academic literature.

I intended to re-interview Kirsten, but the opportunity did not come up again before the end of the research period. As my reading of Badiou matured, to an extent unintentionally, Kirsten's interview became a vital part of the analysis and research findings. This contingency itself had a Badiouian flavour.

Interviews with Midvotech Managers

The viewpoints and voices of Midvotech managers was the core of the study, captured in a series of semi-structured interviews. Informants were either course leaders, other or more senior managers. As managers, they were more directly linked to the policy context as well as being aware of the institutional setting. Course leaders at Midvotech had 0.2FTE release time from teaching duties, so many of the participants were directly involved in classroom delivery in addition to their management role. This served to add breadth to the research as many informants could call upon live experiences in teaching and learning, including impressions or reports of students' views.

Interview	Date
1	14 April 2014
2	25 April 2014
3	11 June 2014
4	11 June 2014
5	30 June 2014
6	10 July 2014
7	21 July 2014
8	13 February 2015
9	20 February 2015
10	19 October 2016
11	07 December 2017
12	16 December 2017

Table 1: Interview dates

Originally interviews were planned to take place over a short period between January and June 2014, to capture a snapshot view of Midvotech. However, after the initial interview with Kirsten, the remaining interviews took place over a significantly longer period, between April 2014 and December 2017, although 7 of the core interviews did take place within the originally-intended window, as shown above in Table 1.

The substantial extension to the planned fieldwork period was due to pressure of work that was to a large extent unforeseen, including an Ofsted inspection and a significant management restructure; evidence of, "the inherently messy and unpredictable nature of fieldwork" (Abraham, 1989). Having reduced my contract from full-time to 3 days-per-week to concentrate on my EdD, events necessitated a formal voluntary suspension of study for a year and a return to full-time work.

Interviews were structured for practical reasons, to help ensure participants did not feel overburdened but also to limit the amount of research data collected. The interview was the sum contribution from most managers, although two participants agreed to a second interview. The second interviews were conducted to monitor whether the unanticipated lengthening of the study had an overly negative impact on the research data, by comparing the data for each participant over the time gap. That there were no significant or radical differences in perspective gave me confidence that the earlier data for other participants also remained valid.

The lengthening of the data collection period had unintended positive consequences, by softening serious concerns over anonymity and commercial sensitivity. On publication of this thesis, the earliest interviews will represent Midvotech as it was more than 5 years ago. This does not unduly affect the points raised, but there are far fewer active commercial sensitivities.

Excluding Kirsten, 11 Midvotech managers were chosen for interview from 20 managers connected to FE delivery at Midvotech at the time, representing a significant proportion of Midvotech's management in FE. 8-10 participants was a viable number for the design, to capture a range of perspectives whilst avoiding an overwhelming amount of data, given the scope of the study. Electing 11 managers for inclusion allowed participants to drop out or decline to be interviewed.

Managers were approached to participate with a view to achieving a representative mix of characteristics to help avoid unnecessary bias and there were, "grounds other than convenience or accessibility to guide [the] selection" (Silverman, 2010, p. 141). A number of the 20 managers at the time had been Midvotech students in the past, some of whom were asked to participate to add their perspective to the data. A number of Midvotech managers had previous involvement with a public FE college environment, some of whom were approached to bring comparative insights to the study. All participants approached agreed to take part, but one of the 11 was never actually interviewed for entirely practical reasons. It was made clear that participants could exit the process at any point without a reason, but all informants who were interviewed contributed fully.

The Interview Schedule

Using Ball, if performativity played a part in Midvotech working life, managers were likely to experience anxiety, which could surface as an emotional reaction or response in the intimate setting of a confidential interview. There was a danger that this might be exacerbated, or perhaps abated, because participants were in conversation with someone 'in-the-know', an insider-researcher, and furthermore a senior manager. In interviewing a fellow insider, I was aware that "respondents say everything … except what goes

without saying" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 612, footnote 4), which might silence comments most valuable to the research.

Pitching the interview well was clearly problematic and, because of the complexity, a more ethnographic approach to the interviews was attractive but at odds with a desire to set clear boundaries around the organisation of the interview process itself. Cohen et al. recognised the weakness of interviewer bias when using interviews as a research tool, but they highlighted Kitwood's approach, which was "not a technique for dealing with bias, but a theory of everyday life" where the "interview is a social encounter" with a number of problematic features (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 410). This more ethnographic view of interviewing favoured a non-directive approach to allow participants' voices to come through, but the researcher's bias could never be eradicated. An alternative strategy of relying solely on unsolicited accounts from participant observation could not preclude bias either, because utterances were deemed more or less relevant through the researcher's filters (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, chap. 5, section 2, para. 14). The notion of an autoethnographic interview fully accepted these limitations, providing a useful frame to avoid over-claiming the supposed objectivity of interview data (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, pp. 69-71).

After considering the above dilemmas during the planning for the interviews, I decided upon a semi-structured model for the interviews. Although I was experienced in interviewing more generally, I had little experience of research interviewing before the Midvotech study. Planning the interviews was therefore especially important and my supervisor offered valuable insights from his experience. Having to learn and develop through actual experience, the sequencing of the interviews was given careful thought. The final interview schedule was agreed with my supervisor and included topics to be discussed, issues within each topic, potential specific questions and associated 'prompts' and 'probes' (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 420-421).

Appendix 1 shows the interview schedule used in all the structured interviews. The opening question was designed to elicit a brief personal history from the interviewee and to help put them at their ease. It also served to set a frame for the interview where it was clear that it was they and their own personal viewpoint at the centre of the interaction. The second section asked for a personal view of Midvotech and an assessment of work-life balance, which

was an attempt to elicit the extent of an emotional investment in Midvotech, whether positive or negative. This came from Ball's work around performativity, mentioned above, but also other work I was reading at the time about the human consequences of the modern workplace (e.g. Rose, 1998; Sennett, 2006).

Building on comments from Kirsten's interview and with a view to assessing individuals' perception of their own agency, there was a section exploring notions of ownership, responsibility and control, explored in detail in *Chapter 5*. Bookending that section were two others, one section about novelty or innovation and the other about change, designed to elicit thoughts around newness and change to submit to a Badiouian analysis.

The penultimate section asked about the policy context and how it impacted upon Midvotech, with a view to understanding managers' awareness of the wider context, relating to Briggs' work mentioned in *Chapter 2*, and how informants responded to policy in their particular role, returning to Ball.

The final section closed the interview with an invitation for each manager to add anything they had not been asked about but considered relevant. Whilst not shown on the schedule, all participants were finally asked to reflect on their experience of the interview.

Research Journal

A detailed Research Journal was kept electronically in a set of Evernote notebooks throughout the research process including the write-up. This represented a body of notes, comments and observations in excess of 300,000 words, as at May 2018. The electronic format synchronised across devices and platforms, enabling easy addition and editing of notes, more or less constantly. The table below shows how notes were categorised and indicates the relative size of each notebook.

Notebook	Notes	Word Count
Research Journal	567	76692
Documents	162	77176
Thoughts	128	12806
Assignments	96	83833
Notes on Texts	64	51631
Total	**1017**	**302138**

Table 2: Electronic notebook summary

The notebooks helped to keep track of the research process, with to-do lists and notes around the development of the thesis, but also acted as a reflective journal, enabling 'conversations' with myself over time. A large proportion of notes helped tease out how the chosen theoretical perspectives related to the study as a whole; around 25% of the notes mentioned Badiou at least once and 10% referred to Ball.

The e-notebooks were used to store sometimes privileged and sensitive information, for example from meetings and email communications. They also provided a triangulation point to corroborate some of the interview data, acting as a rich contextualisation tool.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during each interview itself and continued through into the final version of this thesis. The intention was to develop a "rich description" (Bazeley, 2013, pp. 376-378) to productively hold the tension(s) between and within different managers' perspectives, rather than resolving contradictions. Participants' voices have been deliberately foregrounded in reporting to allow tensions and inconsistencies to be explored openly, hopefully in an engaging way.

Practically, all interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 39 minutes to 1 hour 33 minutes in length, although the majority were within 5 minutes of the 1-hour planned length. Themes arising from the body of each interview were noted in writing on a printout of the schedule during each interview and

impressions and reflections were written straight after each interview in the Evernote Research Journal.

All of the interview participants were already known to me to a greater or lesser degree, which was clearly another source of contextual information, no doubt sometimes partly unconscious.

That the "interviewer stands as a co-participant in the construction of a discourse" (C. L. Briggs, 1986, p. 25) was a regular point of reflection during the interviews, but also during transcription and analysis. My aim was to say as little as possible during the interviews themselves to help reduce my influence on the data, but I was well aware that my encouraging body language and positive vocalisations had impact, as did the questions which formed the schedule, in addition to the way they were asked. Reflexive insights were recorded in the Research Journal throughout the process of collecting and analysing the interview data, informing more intuitive threads of the research.

Sense-checking and giving participants the opportunity to confirm or elaborate points as necessary or appropriate were useful during the interview itself, but I decided against sharing transcriptions with participants, mainly - and purely practically - because of the range of timescales in completing transcriptions, which meant that it was impossible to treat participants equally. This proved to be a positive decision when conducting the second interviews, as both participants confirmed that they could not remember their previous interview responses or recall the questions posed.

Interview recordings were transcribed by myself, a process which was time intensive but invaluable in terms of getting to know and appreciate the data. Each transcription took approximately 6 hours for each 1-hour interview. Further thoughts and analyses about the interviews were recorded in the Research Journal throughout the process. Post-interview reflections proved to be useful in helping appreciate how my own experience of the interview influenced my understanding of the data. Initial impressions noted after each interview sometimes prompted further written commentary after transcription. I discovered that my reading of interviews changed through the process of transcription for some of the participants. For example, one participant had seemed somewhat "guarded" in their responses during the

interview, but not so in the light of transcription, as demonstrated in the research notes:

> *Post-interview:* Quite a brief (and therefore guarded?) interview … it felt sometimes that the responses and attitudes were somehow quite ingrained and not necessarily based on evidence or fact.

> *Post-transcription:* A little unfair in post-interview comment about brevity. [Pseudonym] actually speaks quite fast, which I noticed in having to write it down. Some of the comments are very insightful and complex.

In the early stages of analysis, a number of word-clouds were created from the collated interview data to help identify potential themes. An example cloud is shown below:



Figure 3: Example word cloud

Apart from common words, such as 'because', 'just' and 'more', words like 'new', 'changed', 'different', 'funding', and 'control' helped inform a more detailed thematic analysis.

Systematic data analysis was iterative, with the initial 7 interviews, undertaken between April and July in 2014, forming a set that were analysed over the summer of 2014. Some themes were straightforward to identify and

compare between informants because they were themes explicitly raised during the interview itself, for example managers' thoughts about ownership, responsibility and control as well as the theme of change. These themes were simply collated in word processed documents to explore similarities and differences in viewpoints, approaches and opinions.

Because I was interested in agency, early on in the process a modal verb analysis was carried out, where different modal verbs in various tenses were searched electronically and marked out in distinct ways using different fonts, styles and highlighting for each different word, such as *can*, *want*, *will*, *could*, *would*, *should*, *need*, *have to*, etc. Transcripts colourfully annotated in this way were re-read and explored, looking for patterns and connections across the data. Comments were added electronically to note links between informants. This process was further extended to other frequently-occurring words such as *change*, *think*, *team*, *feel*, *better*, and *real*. The data was re-reviewed for plausible patterns, similarities and dissimilarities and potential new themes were identified on an ongoing basis.

The interview files were uploaded onto my smart phone, so I was able to listen to and familiarise myself with the interviews whilst walking around. This ensured that I was able to more or less simultaneously hold a holistic view of the data alongside the developing thematic threads and patterns within and across interviews.

Interview commentary was interrogated with respect to theoretical concepts, for example, relating to Ball's notions of marketisation, managerialism and performativity and notions of compliance from Coffield et al. My reading continued alongside the data analysis and I was listening to and reading lectures by Badiou, which stimulated a number of explorations across the data as possible themes emerged from the academic literature or my theoretical explorations, some more intuitive or speculative than others.

This led to the development of a number of mindmaps as an analytical tool. Figure 4 shows one of a number of versions of links exploring themes from the data with respect to the work of Badiou. Multiple mindmaps related themes in different ways to develop a number of views of what the data was able to articulate with respect to the research questions.

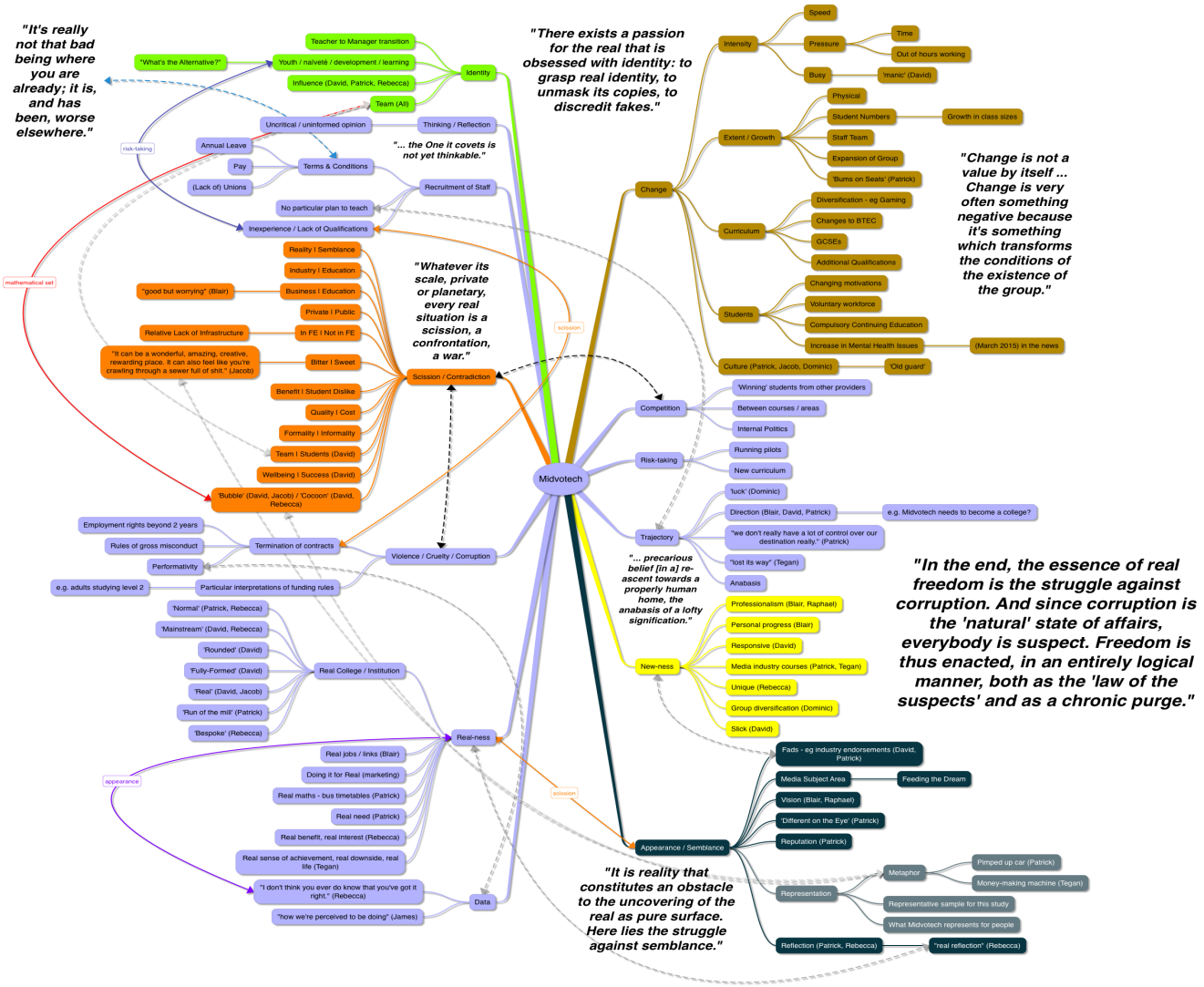


Figure 4: Example mindmap

The Research Journal became a vital tool for capturing thoughts, reflections and insights, which ultimately informed the development of this thesis.

Transcribed shortly after each took place, the later interviews were added to the data pool one by one. Later data were reviewed against themes identified in the first 7 interviews, noting any significant departures in perspective from the earlier interviews and any potential new themes. Kirsten's interview was fully transcribed in detail after the initial 7 managers' interviews, as it became clearer how Kirsten's voice helped me relate the study to my reading of Badiou. Kirsten's interview data therefore became a new triangulation point a little later in the process, forming the basis of what became *Chapter 6* of this thesis, which is a re-reading of the Midvotech site, using Badiou.

Research Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Coordinator in September 2013 and the study adhered to educational research ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011).

In line with the BERA guidelines, anyone involved in the research was subject to voluntary informed consent, to which all interviewees signed up. Participants were free to withdraw or be involved without question or negative consequences and were issued with an information sheet summarising the researcher's and their own commitments should they wish to (continue to) take part. Those involved were consulted as much as reasonable to keep them informed about the project and how their data was being used. At best, research activities benefited participants, as well as inducing wider benefits to Midvotech and perhaps beyond; interviews were intended to be a positive experience as much as possible, "provoking new insights and changes" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 414).

No participants were identified to anyone else, including other participants, during the research, which will, of course, remain the case. Interviews were scheduled privately and confidentially; any room bookings, for example, were not identifiable as a research interview.

All research participants were anonymised using randomly generated pseudonyms and records were kept carefully and securely to avoid accidental disclosure. It would be quite straightforward to identify the case study organisation itself, so a number of additional levels of obfuscation were introduced into the reporting of the research, to protect the identities of those who had agreed to take part. For example, data was further anonymised by replacing pseudonyms with a code for the interview itself. There were 12 codes, consisting of the letter 'M' and a randomly generated number between 10 and 99. Each code was used as if it were a person. This removed gender identification, and non-gendered language was employed in reporting or quoting from interviews.

The coding of interview-as-person served to obscure the second interviews and the random numbers in the code concealed the chronology of the interviews, so it is now not possible to identify when each interview took

place. Sometimes the code was omitted completely to further disguise the identity of the speaker. Marking out the special status of the MD meant retaining the pseudonym Kirsten. Her voice is therefore less anonymous than others, but she has agreed to the reporting of comments clearly attributable to her.

The extended timescale of the study had a positive impact on anonymity. Many of the participants had changed roles since their interview, and an unspecified number (i.e. more than zero) were no longer employed by Midvotech at the end of the research period, thereby making it very difficult to identify individuals.

Role Conflicts and Power Relations

My status as insider-researcher but also senior manager was a continual source of concern, leading to multiple potential and actual role-conflicts. Only managers were asked to participate, partly to minimise ethical issues arising from unequal power relationships and levels of seniority. Little has been written in the educational literature around manager-as-researcher, so the Midvotech study provides potentially useful insights for others in a similar position. This may become less unusual as the Professional Doctorate becomes more commonplace (Mercer, 2007, p. 2).

In light of the management power-gradient, interviewees may have found it more difficult to be honest, even beyond a natural reticence for some in simply being interviewed. Whilst my role of leader-insider-researcher increased complexity, reflecting on interview comments which I would have responded to differently in my manager role was a helpful strategy to process the conflict:

> Conflicts may occur as unexpected or unwanted information arises. Researchers need to be aware of the influence of their organisational role on coercion, compliance and access to privileged information. Equally, much learning, new insights and creativity and the strengthening of relationships may also be released as a result of engaging with and working through these tensions (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 39).

Whilst honouring the 'validity' of participants' input, a more ethnographic appreciation of the interview encounter, especially with respect to honesty, was useful and enlightening:

> Separating the question of the truth or falsity of people's accounts from the analysis of those accounts as social phenomena allows us to treat participants' knowledge as ***both*** resource and topic, and to do so in a principled way (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, chap. 5, para. 10).

Apart from manager-specific role conflicts, my insider-researcher's privileged access to a novel research site came at the cost of tensions, which strained existing work relationships. This introduced subtle unfamiliar dynamics and ambiguities into an already complex environment, especially as the findings from the research became clearer:

> power and ethics inevitably come in to the frame because, in social settings, it is rare for all participants to be absolutely and totally equally positioned in terms of the personal, social and institutional power, authority and status they possess at any particular time (Sikes & Potts, 2008, p. 179).

Managers expressed their view of Kirsten as the locus of control in the organisation, perhaps not surprisingly given her status as MD. Managers participating in the study would have had less day-to-day contact with Kirsten, but my own relationship with Kirsten was similar to theirs in that she was my superior in the organisation too, albeit as my direct line manager. My managerial superiority to interviewees most likely modulated responses during the interviews. All of the participants were known to me to a greater or lesser extent and our notions of each other, brought into the interview context, would have regulated the interaction to some extent. These complex power interrelationships almost certainly coloured my own reading of managers' commentary, even unconsciously, both in the interview itself but also during data analysis. To a large extent, this necessitated a poststructuralist approach to the study as well as reducing the number of appropriate theoretical lenses, thereby strengthening the case for using Badiou.

Loxley & Seery pejoratively saw 'outsider research' as, "everything about us without us" (2008, p. 15) and Bridges highlighted ethical issues inherent in commenting from outside a community, at worst disempowering, exploiting or

misunderstanding the researched group. He argued, though, that in some ways the insider-researcher was *always* an outsider, by virtue of being a researcher. This was certainly true for me, in different ways at different points in the research journey. My researcher role was a complex mix of insider and outsider with respect to different roles and characteristics (Bridges, 2001, p. 372). Bridges' solution was the notion of a 'dialogic' or 'educative' engagement with the researched community (ibid., p. 383).

The rise of practitioner research in the 1960's facilitated "a radical break with the hegemony of university research" (Loxley & Seery, 2008, p. 24). More recently, the Professional Doctorate enables fresh insight into professional practices, as well as opening up possibilities for new 'legitimate' forms of knowledge. However, because EdD students tend to research their own workplaces in which they hold substantial roles, they:

> may be particularly compromised by the insider nature of their research, and in managing their location as 'insiders', they may necessarily change position, sometimes frequently, along axes with respect to both their research and their professional practice (Drake & Heath, 2008, p. 127).

This can have far-reaching impact, at worst jeopardising 'continued employment' (Sikes & Potts, 2008, p. 4).

The main strategy to help mitigate insider effects and the impact of power relations on the study related to the formalisation of the interview process. The design itself, resting principally on a comparatively small number of semi-structured interviews, was both straightforward and bounded, in deliberate contrast to the inherent complications of the study.

Context markers for the interview encounter were consciously made as different as they could be to any more routine interaction between myself and each participant. This helped me mark out my own researcher identity as well as helping managers understand the interaction as new or distinct. The formal introduction, outlining the ethics of the research process, and the requirement that interviewees sign off on their agreement to the terms and mutual responsibilities of the study introduced elements of a different relationship. That the interview was recorded also rendered it an atypical situation. The opening personal history question served a number of functions, but relevant to the complications of insider-research power inequalities, the extended

information volunteered by participants was fresh to the relationship. Whilst I knew each participant, accounts of personal histories were generally new to me, a fact known to both parties. In addition, personal histories as described contributed to a previously invisible non-professional context, enabling me to understand participants differently.

Notwithstanding the above complexities and risks, and against the claim to new legitimate forms of knowledge, the fact remains that research conducted in-house is not published widely, due to credibility issues with insider-research conducted as part of an EdD (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 44).

Reflections

An unexpected consequence of the interviews was a deepened appreciation of my own impact upon Midvotech as a senior manager. As mentioned earlier, I had stepped down from my previous role and reduced my full-time contract to 3 days-per-week in order to devote more time and energy to my EdD. In response to the question about changes at Midvotech over the years, I was surprised that four managers explicitly mentioned my stepping down as significant. For example:

> I guess the biggest change was when you stepped down from your role, I suppose. That's the biggest significant change that affected everyone (M95).

> At the time you were [job role] … when you stepped down that left an interesting gap – a single point of contact for everyone in education (M33).

This prompted me to investigate the extent to which the study was autoethnographic. When things changed at Midvotech, my influence on the change process was probably not insignificant.

One example was in Midvotech's perceived journey from informality to formality, considered over the next two chapters. I agree with M33's view that an increase in size probably forces a shoring up of structure, but my personal style and preference for informality – perhaps more of a poststructural non-formality - most likely introduced an inertia into the transition. This is relevant to the Badiouian 'figures of the subject' reading, outlined in *Chapter 6*.

Reflecting on the interviews themselves, the process went smoothly and generated very rich data, capturing responses that appeared to be genuine and thoughtful. To me, the interviews felt honest and open, a privilege to have been involved in. I would like to think the careful planning of the questions, the ethical reflections and attention to practical detail had a positive impact on the resulting data. The high quality of the interviews was evidenced in the number of quotes able to convey a point with little elucidation. The biographical opening question seemed especially effective in securing quality data. This stemmed from the experience of being a research interview participant myself on more than one occasion and finding the approach to be a particularly effective way of countering my own performance anxieties associated with being interviewed.

All interview participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their experience to conclude their interview. Many interviewees commented on not being sure what to expect or that the experience of being interviewed had been different to expected. One participant felt the experience had been cathartic. Certainly, no one reported a negative experience. M33 reflected at length about the validity of their responses, reported here in full to summarise and elucidate the epistemological dilemma, but also to demonstrate the level of participant engagement:

> Because it's a Q&A, a lot of it is made up on the spot. Conversational obviously and that's one way to elicit things. I'm sure I would give different answers if I had a couple of weeks to reflect on the questions and figure out and do some thinking - it's very easy to blurt out an answer because that happens to what you're thinking right now or because you think 'well I need to say something' um, so what I tend to find is that - the actual answer to the question isn't the first one you get, it's what develops over - if you get chance to talk about it and express your thoughts through words - even then you don't get to the answer. The truthful answer to all of those questions is 'I don't know' - and even if I went away to think about it for 10 years I still wouldn't know.

Summary

The Midvotech project was a poststructuralist embedded revelatory case study with a single aim and two research questions, but my leader-insider-researcher status in some senses undermined the basic case study design.

Data collection spanned the period from May 2013 to December 2017, which was considerably longer than originally planned. An initial unstructured hour-long interview with Kirsten was followed by 12 semi-structured interviews with 10 Midvotech managers. A detailed and extensive written Research Journal was built up over the data collection period, contributing contextual and corroborative insights to the development of the thesis.

Audio recordings were transcribed by myself and transcriptions used to undertake a number of detailed thematic analyses. Various themes emerged from the data, explored over the following two chapters, many related to or illustrative of the relevant literatures, outlined in *Chapter 2,* and theories and concepts from the work of Ball and Badiou, summarised in *Chapter 3*.

Ethical concerns and role conflicts were an almost constant feature of the research process, including complications around power relationships which affected my ability to be cleanly employee, manager or researcher and participants to be cleanly employee, manager or informant.

Chapter 5: Midvotech and FE

This chapter reveals Midvotech through thematic threads drawn from the core research data, consisting of 12 formal interviews with managers and an interview with Kirsten, deliberately foregrounding interviewees' voices. Managers express their views of FE as a whole, demonstrating how a coherent view of FE is not straightforward for them or their students, and those with experience of both private and public FE compare Midvotech to a college context.

Participants describe what it is like to work at Midvotech, how they came to be there and their view of the place of business in education. The operation of each of Ball's policy technologies is investigated in turn. Whilst, of the three, the mechanism of performativity is most cleanly identifiable, marketisation and managerialism are shown to have a particular meaning for Midvotech. To explore managerialism, participants reflect on their level of agency, through their perceived ownership, responsibility and control as managers.

Viewing Midvotech primarily through the lenses of the FE literature and the work of Ball, policy appears to be less of a significant driver for change at Midvotech than claimed in FE more generally. The relationship with the lead provider and other local concerns override or obscure wider policy concerns. A high level of compliance with national policy is evident at Midvotech, rather than policy being experienced as a source of tension, which is somewhat at odds with the dominant view of FE in the literature.

Private and Public FE

The Midvotech study was not a comparative study, but it was possible to appreciate, within the bounds of the study, how those working at Midvotech understood their position in wider FE – its nature and purpose - and to locate Midvotech in relation to the FE literature. As noted in *Chapter 4*, some managers were invited to participate because of their previous experience of working in an FE college and the perspective they could contribute to the study. Staff could, and did, migrate between private and public organisations. As well as personnel who joined Midvotech from public FE, some had also left to join public FE.

That FE is not well understood is evident in the academic literature and an important theme in this thesis. Coffield et al. argued that this was partly due to key influencers in FE lacking personal experience of FE, "a world which remains invisible to most politicians, academics and commentators because, with very few exceptions, neither they nor their children have ever passed through it" (Coffield et al., 2008, p. 4).

To varying degrees, many participants did have personal experience of FE, explained in response to the first orientation question in the formal interview, which, without prompting, tended to sketch out interviewees' own educational experiences. One (anonymised) participant admitted that when making their own post-school choices, "BTECs were seen as this joke qualification", but:

> now my opinion on that's changed. There's a lot of worth in … BTEC, in changing people from what might have been a negative experience at school to hopefully more of a positive experience here. I like to think that they're learning … to be better at communication, better people, really ready for society, which I don't think you necessarily get in a sixth form college. We were sort of herded through a system.

There were different views across managers interviewed of the nature and purpose of FE, from preparing learners for the world of work, to developing them as human beings and/or valuable members of society. M29 commented on the odd 'between' nature of FE as:

> this sort of two-year holding pattern … The tutors are – they're not teachers, but they're not lecturers. The students aren't school kids, but they're not doing a degree for their career. I think it's this weird holding pattern. I think what students actually get the most out of FE is learning to be human beings.

Some informants were more committed to the idea that FE was about vocational skills development. "I want my students to leave here with a set of relevant skills. The skills and a portfolio to get them into a job" (M88). Many agreed that Midvotech did the industry training aspect well and viewed this positively. "And of course, we are training the students to be employable. Midvotech does that more than other places. That's a good thing" (M47).

For some, the promise of future employment was perceived as a deliberate seduction. "[Midvotech] is brilliant at selling the dream. People walk around, and they're wowed. It's super cool. It feels like you can achieve your dream here. How awesome is that?" (M87). However, managers were also aware that, "Not all of our students will go into the industry … [but] at least the skills learned here are transferrable" (M47). M33 pointed out the practical realities of Midvotech's marketing message:

> [Midvotech is] supposed to exist within the industry, and it does to an extent, but like all providers it seems anyway that it faces the same sorts of challenges – it's very difficult to guarantee that all of the students will get a certain threshold of that kind of industry engagement or activity. You know, not just that they would engage with it, but even that you're able to offer it. Because you've got [number] students a year – that's a lot of stuff to be doing.

M28 drew on personal experiences outside work; "Whenever I see ex-students, I've never met one who's working in the industry, and it's not to say they don't. I see them in a shop or a newsagent or they're working as a chef."

The absence of a clear link between education and employment echoed concerns in the VET literature. For example, in a summary history of UK VET, Hyland & Winch argued that the more recent VET landscape had developed more in response to growth in numbers engaging in post-school provision, with the policy aim of boosting "economic competitiveness and social inclusion", rather than an increased engagement in vocational education by employers. They observed that the world of work had a more contingent relationship to VET. This was especially so, they argued, in light of an increased focus on transferable or 'softer' interpersonal skills, usurping more job-specific knowledge and skills (2007, pp. 16-22). Reflecting a common focus in the VET literature at the time, they argued that Britain exhibited characteristics of a 'low-skill economy' in which HE was driven by what was "currently in demand or fashionable among young people" (ibid., p. 92).

Even though Midvotech managers believed that education, especially vocational education, should lead in a coherent way into work, their own experience had been quite different. In fact, a direct and linear route into relevant work from earlier study choices was outside the experience of all managers who expressed a view. M16 reflected that, "My generation were

pushed through university – we all got degrees – everybody I know has got a degree … that we're not using, a lot of us – in fact, the majority of us are not using them in any way … We're all in successful career paths."

Few research participants envisaged a job in education. "I didn't have a career in teaching in mind" (M44). Some of the participants had been students at Midvotech before securing a teaching role there, a phenomenon wider than those involved in the study. One participant noted that their current teaching team included ex-students whom they had taught, which brought particular challenges. As well as the small number who had secured a teaching role at Midvotech after their studies there, more had exploited a connection with someone already employed there. In fact, this was true for over half of the study informants.

Private-public differences were seen both negatively and positively across those who were in a position to compare. M88 applied for their Midvotech role as a deliberate "break from institutions. I wanted something a little bit different." M28 thought that, "Sometimes it feels like we're different for the sake of being different ... As crap as a lot of FE colleges are, I suspect there are certain things that they're doing that are slightly better than ours, but maybe we don't entertain that as much as we could." Those with experience of college life believed that others without their experience did not appreciate what it was like to work in a general FE college. "I don't think that many people here really understand what it's like in FE; the good points and the bad. People here assume FE is crap" (M92).

Some views about private-ness appeared to be coloured by expectation or inexplicit comparison, rather than real experiences. For example, M88 expressed a hyperbolically positive view of Midvotech's private status:

> Here is a very very different beast. Institutions accrete procedure. I don't feel a lot of that here. It's very very flexible. Much more of an open dynamic. More than I would have expected. A lot of that - it's a private company.

Perceptions of the private-public divide were not clear-cut and somewhat conflicted; the private status of Midvotech had positive and negative aspects. "I guess there's the obvious difference that it's a private business rather than directly government funded, which makes things better and worse in some ways" (M95). In considering how the relationship with the college functioned,

M92 reflected at the end of their interview on the inconsistency in their own thinking:

> I realise actually through talking that quite a lot of the opinions that I have are quite paradoxical, but nonetheless … I think it's this thought of that [Midvotech] doesn't feel to have compete ownership of what happens cos things are dictated to [Midvotech] – numbers are dictated, places blah blah blah – there's this thing where we're not a school of [college partner] but then we *kind* of are …

Performativity

Of Ball's triumvirate of reform, perhaps most cleanly apparent in the Midvotech data was performativity, although not wholly negatively and in a nuanced way. There were a number of interview questions specifically aimed at exploring anxiety, partly with a view to understanding whether the claimed 'terrors' of performativity were a part of Midvotech working life, shown in *Appendix 1*. Some participants mentioned anxiety, even directly, although not clearly in relationship to the operation of performativity as described by Ball.

Managers considered Midvotech a high-pressure work environment, demanding of emotional commitment. Compared to their public FE experience M92 thought, "It does seem manic here, it really does seem busy … It is a more pressurised environment here, without a shadow of a doubt." M88 felt they were, "busier now than I ever have been." The perceived pressure took its toll, which for M16, "came out in big rants about how bad it all was." For M20, "There's intense and crazy ridiculous intense." Emotional strain was clearly visible in the interview data:

> We just seem to do without, but get by, by hook or by crook. That takes its toll on people. [Midvotech] definitely takes a pound of flesh, whereas a college, there isn't a demand to do that I don't think. Just get on with it and do your best. That's a different mentality and a different expectation (M28).

When asked about work-life balance, all participants related personal experiences when work had affected them emotionally. For example:

> Personally, I lost a lot of sleep. Worrying and fretting and trying to organise and thinking about and how we're gonna manage and how the team are going to cope (M47).
>
> It was making me very unhappy … That did affect me at home (M28).
>
> Relationships have suffered at times, but only occasionally (M44).
>
> Sometimes it's really busy. In term 1 last year I thought I was going to have a breakdown – I was doing 50-hour weeks (M95).
>
> I would be there from 8.30 am until gone 6 – you'd be thinking about it all the time (M87).
>
> There have been lots of occasions where things that have happened have triggered emotional responses – anxiety, anger, fear, uncertainty I suppose – the nature of the job requires you to take work home (M33).

Emotional investment in Midvotech extended to concerns about students' welfare. "I also feel a sense of emotion towards students who don't have as positive home life as they should – I feel like … they're not going home to a nice situation" (M16).

The high-pressure environment was experienced as a lack of time. M44 complained that end-of-academic-year tasks left little time for the teaching team to develop new skills for the following year. There was a clear desire for time to, "sit down as a team and play with some stuff." A shortage of time was also evident in the prevalence of out-of-hours working, which appeared to be a common coping strategy for participants. For M44, "Development would normally fall on a Sunday" and M33, "had to learn a lot outside of work" to perform their role. However, M16 had developed different coping skills to attain more of a work-life balance:

> I also do feel like I can disconnect myself. Now – not at first. I felt that the job was never going to end, like this horrible cyclical nightmare. But now I shut down my laptop at the end of the day – that's me done now.

Despite the commitment to Midvotech, there was a sense that contributions were not always rewarded as they might be. "I don't think I and others in that

position get the credit that we're owed for busting our balls with very little reward – I don't mean financially" (M28).

With respect to 'terrors' relating more clearly to performativity, a number of participants commented on the importance of statistics and metrics to help them manage courses. This was viewed both positively and negatively, in some cases concurrently. M16 identified a motivational element to statistical comparisons, seeing value in the competition:

> There's a definite feel now to – pressure to do well, pressure to perform and pressure to have the best course. When your stats are on a big screen and you're thinking 'I really want that to be 97 and I really want us to be performing really well'.

Negative aspects of performativity were more visible in how students were measured. For some, a focus on the achievement metric was having deleterious effects, and increasingly so. M37 claimed that, "I try not to put criteria and qualification before learning. I do think [Midvotech] is moving more towards that." This increased need to measure students' progress was thought be the cause of an increase in paperwork. Some participants found it difficult to appreciate the necessity for certain documentation. M87 thought the administration was, "just filling a museum of paperwork." M29 admitted to finding it difficult to reconcile the requirement for measurement with the 'real' needs of the students:

> I don't fear paperwork, but I like paperwork that I feel is actually benefiting the students … I guess was just I felt like I was being asked to do things that weren't in the best interest of the students for the sake of paperwork and numbers and statistics.

The increased use of data and metrics to track students was couched more as a valuable tool to navigate the complexities of tracking, especially with the steady increase in student numbers. M44, for example, viewed the tracking systems positively:

> I'm able to see across the board. I've always been able to see our measures of performance; how we're doing, how we're perceived to be doing … just being able to use that data and drive forward.

Developments in technology had been embraced to help with the job at hand. This may have linked to the particular technological focus in the subject areas at Midvotech, making employing technology as a coping strategy more natural.

Marketisation

Midvotech could be considered fully marketised by its nature, operating as an independent business, albeit reliant on public funding through a subcontracting arrangement. For Midvotech conceptually, 'marketisation' had little meaning because of the implied journey from non-market to market in the term, which Midvotech was not on. In fact, as a private enterprise in FE, Midvotech was itself part of the marketisation of education which Ball was so critical of.

For Ball, the seemingly insistent reconciliation of the education and business was changing the very nature of education, redefining "education as a commodity" (Ball, 2007, p. 24). As we have seen, opinions that education and business have a strained relationship are common, as evidenced in negative perspectives around subcontracting in FE, especially with respect to the franchising scandals, discussed in *Chapter 2*.

Thinking of Midvotech as a fully marketised version of public FE was helpful in understanding how it was different. Ball's notion was useful, but in a negative sense.

Research participants identified Midvotech's physical environment as a fundamental and tangible difference between Midvotech and public FE. M88 expressed that, "The environment has a huge impact. It doesn't feel like a college at all. A delegation came up from [College Name] during the [event]. They were insanely jealous. Because of our facilities – it's a phenomenal environment." Similarly, M28 observed that, "you could walk around the building and it just doesn't feel like you're in a college. We're used to it now. If you walk down 20 other corridors in a college, you'd be reminded how different it is on the eye." M95 also commented, "What's different is … the facilities … when you look at them at face value they look amazing, compared to colleges that look like colleges." This visual difference for some had a vital emotional component. "There's a sense of excitement about it … When I was

at college, it was a slight adjustment to school, whereas [Midvotech] is a cool place to be" (M87).

However, many participants identified a darker side to this visual impact. They were less comfortable with an apparent gap between appearance and reality at Midvotech. "[W]hat upsets me about [Midvotech is] that we are a lot for show" (M28). Extending a metaphor of FE as a car, and a poor relation when compared to the schools-sector 'car', M28 admitted that Midvotech "is a slightly better car that's been pimped up, but I wouldn't want to show anyone under the bonnet."

Managers accepted that, as a business, "reputation's everything" (M28) for Midvotech, and in general they appeared to believe that Midvotech was well regarded, which was a source of pride. "It's well known now across [the county] about the course that we deliver and what we deliver as well. With our success stories with students that are leaving [Midvotech]" (M44).

Midvotech openly differentiated itself from public FE, as an alternative choice for prospective FE students. The environment was deliberately not college-like; it did not *feel* like a college. It was intentionally more business-like, encouraging embedded professional role-play for the students, which had a twin nature. M88 identified what they saw as the positive side of this approach:

> In other institutions, the professionalism side isn't emphasised until the very end of their course … [Here], although technically you are a student, you are expected to act like a young professional, and I think this is an important expectation.

However, M37 identified the more negative potential of this 'vocationalisation' of education, simultaneously implying a trend. "I don't think [students] enjoy being here as much as they used to [which is the] downside to making it more like work."

Midvotech clearly and by definition existed within a market context, which for some was linked to a financial focus. For example, when asked about how they thought changes in wider FE affected Midvotech, M28 responded:

> Well, it *is* driven by money, isn't it? Take away Ofsted and the exam boards, but we are providing a service because there's a need for it, but we're not a charity. So, we are finding bums on seats wherever they come from. If there is a certain need in [subject area], which there was 3 or 4 years ago, then we accommodate that.

All managers interviewed perceived Midvotech as a business around which many held strong and sometimes contradictory opinions. M95 confided that, "My original aim to go into education was to give something back, but of course it's a business so it is all about money." However, referring to a planned new course, M95 remarked later in the same interview, "I assume it's because it's an easy win moneywise, which we need. I don't have an issue with that". M87 perceived that, "You get a sense of 'we're in this for the money' … You do get a strong sense of 'this is financial'." M44 took a pragmatic view, pointing out that, "Obviously, without students we wouldn't have jobs."

Most managers mentioned funding during their formal interview, sometimes in terms of being at odds with quality concerns, especially in relation to Midvotech's growth, which was perceived by M87 to compromise professionalism. "[Increased class sizes] impacts on your perceived ability to give the best quality … I think you just have to accept that you're not going to be doing the best that you could be doing." M87 believed that organisational growth had serious negative consequences:

> I think the funding changes that happen, um, makes [Midvotech] try to think of new ways to, to deal with that and I think normally it's 'go to' is more students. So, if you get less funding per student, we need more students, and that puts a strain on [Midvotech]'s infrastructure.

Midvotech's market identity seemed to be embedded in the culture, exerting influence at a number of levels. For example, M44 considered course development in a particular way, following "market trends … to see which area requires development and where we can fill a gap that's not being covered in the local area." Midvotech-as-market-entity perhaps also underpinned a competitive spirit evident in inter-course competition around measures of performance, which M37 colourfully described:

> Rather than seeing [course] as part of the same team and trying to help each other, you're seeing them as someone who has got better stats than you or worse stats than you. And, you know, I'm looking at my course achieved stat going 'ok, well, I'm just above [Name], so as long as I can keep above [Name] it's him whose getting yelled at, not me.

Kirsten proposed a wider frame for the notion of a market, in which the 'product' of Midvotech was the next generation.

> When you can see other influences that are not so good for the city and consequently the product, our students, becoming employees or business people, that you want decisions being made at a highish level where money's being - where investment's going - to have some benefit for those sort of people.

Many participants shared Ball's suspicion of the business-education relationship and were similarly highly critical. M47 expressed a desire for freedom from the college relationship, as well as uncoupling the education and commercial aspects of the wider group. "It's time for [Midvotech] to become independent from the main people – from the college – it's time for the education to be separate from the business" (M47). Conflicted views about the business-education relationship in the data often related to internal tensions between the education provision and the wider group. M92 identified difficulties with cross-group infrastructure, for example technical services, as compared to a college infrastructure, finding it, "staggering that some things can take such a long time … the focus isn't just actually on the education … that is a bit frustrating." M47 expanded on their desire for separation between education and business. "For me, the education side of things makes perfect sense … but, for me, I'm wondering whether it's a good mix to have education alongside business … The business and the education seem to be a little bit too close" (M47).

For Kirsten, the group was a strategic imperative. The education business being one of a number of other businesses was what made the group distinct:

> For me – I do think about this a lot more than I ever did. I think where we innovate and where we're unique is that, you know, a genuine linkage between the talent that [Midvotech] is producing and, you know, it working with some of our other parts of the business.

Others agreed, and the group was often cited in the interview question about what was new or different about Midvotech:

> I guess we've got the [business] which is new and different, which is potentially quite exciting (M95).

> The quite significant diversification that's happened over recent years is the most unique thing about it (M20).

For M95, the potential of various educational links with business, and vice versa, were not fully exploited. There was a, "massive resource next door with young minds to help with stuff, but not used." In spite of seeing the potential, though, M95 was not alone in holding a cynical view of the links between the education and commercial business aspects of Midvotech:

> It often feels in education that there's more thought of some of the other businesses than there is of education, even though we all know that education is making a lot of money and actually keeping some of the other businesses going (M95).

There was a perception that the business side of the Midvotech group of companies was changing. Expressed with bitter cynicism, M87 thought that, "The business side has become more apparent … Now with [Business A] and [Business B] it's very public facing. That's changed the shamelessness of that."

For some, the business aspect of Midvotech did not preclude other aspects. M20 explained the balance between the social value of Midvotech and the funding needed for it to exist:

> Built on being a little bit different, being the underdog, offering something that no one else can do, for example having students that start with us at level 1 who are from the most disadvantaged areas in the country essentially and them ending up with a foundation degree or a full honours degree, that's when we're doing it at our best. So I don't think it's not driven by quality … The funding and the money side is the dark … the one that's actually running the show … We want things to be good, but there's obviously a line between good and costs.

Managerialism

In a similar way to marketisation, Ball's notion of managerialism, or New Public Management, had a particular meaning for Midvotech. Having never been under 'public management', clearly the acronym 'NPM' was not applicable. Midvotech was subject to relatively low levels of bureaucracy, often associated with public management.

However, bureaucracy *had* increased, in tandem with increased student numbers. It could therefore be argued that Midvotech was on a similar trajectory to public FE, compelled into a more structured, or managerial, approach as the organisation grew, but from a different perspective. This thinking was strongly supported in the data. Midvotech was in the process of becoming more formal. This increased formality was not the same as increased managerialism as defined by Ball, though. The need to employ "practices that are appropriate for the conduct of private-sector enterprises" (Taubman, 2015, p. 108) made no sense for Midvotech, being a 'private-sector enterprise' already. Midvotech's position was somehow 'post-NPM'.

Some interviewees understood Midvotech's growth as the driving force behind a developing organisational structure and proliferating systems, a burgeoning bureaucracy. M20 reasoned that,

> As the business is growing, because it's becoming big, you obviously have to section things off to make them manageable, but you still need to maintain those links between the two.

M28 agreed. Since they had started at Midvotech, "There's more managers, there's more tutors, there's more course leaders, more structure."

More in line with Ball's critique was the perceived increase in a managerial approach to teaching and learning practices. An example of this was a perceived change from 'guiding' learners in a session to 'managing' them, as class sizes grew: "What I feel I'm best at is guiding students into learning how to use the [equipment] – how to use software - that changes because you have to stop guiding them per se and just manage them – it's a different tactic" (M87).

The relationship between management and agency was conceptually important to the Midvotech study. Returning briefly to the literature, Hillier outlined a critique of managerialism which rested on the notion of agency (2015, pp. 167-168). In this view, 'top-down' processes of management were problematic, especially in sectors reliant on professional judgement, like teaching. Argued in a similar way, government reform was seen as an attack on professionalism, even an attempt to diminish it (Taubman, 2015, p. 107). Coffield et al. were highly critical of the perceived top-down approach of the New Labour Government (2008, p. 82), pointing out that government, itself a public service, was also subject to managerialism.

The Midvotech study was designed partly to investigate the level of permeability of its subcontract arrangement to wider political influence, as articulated in RQ1. The notion of management was therefore critical in a number of ways, especially in terms of the extent of 'management' by the state. I concentrated on agency when developing the interview schedule because I was less interested in eliciting theories of management from interviewees. Instead, a section in each interview was devoted to exploring perceptions of various forms of oversight, namely ownership, responsibility and control, shown in *Appendix 1*.

In general, participants gave comprehensive answers to these agency questions. For some, responses were distinctly different across the three categories of ownership, responsibility and control. The three variants of oversight were queried in the same order in each interview, which may have impacted on responses. Some interviewees moved onto a different category spontaneously without being asked. This section of the interview was especially interesting for one participant, who, based on my post-interview notes, focussed on the middle distance throughout the interview, but looked elsewhere in response to the question about ownership. This, in addition to a long pause before answering, suggested that the question required more thought, processing, or perhaps care, than other questions.

With respect to the first of the three terms, ownership, some responses were specific to job roles, so difficult to report anonymously, but three participants felt they had ownership of their team; "I think I have ownership of my team. I don't have anyone instructing me to do anything different. They're either not interested, or they trust me to get on with it. I assume it's the latter, but I

suspect there's a little bit of the other as well" (M28). Six others specified ownership of their course, course development or students' performance on their course, "because I feel that I can direct where that goes" (M92). "I feel like I own the course – I feel like I can design it myself - no one ever questions you about what your intentions are. I like that" (M16).

Ownership was framed positively for many; "I do pretty much have ownership of my team and I'm allowed to do that – that's brilliant" (M95). One interviewee commented on what they thought was peculiar to ownership at Midvotech: "Ownership's a really difficult one at [Midvotech] I think because um you have, I think you probably have ownership of stuff that just that that ultimately dips below the radar of interest of [Kirsten]" (M33).

With respect to responsibility, some participants felt they had responsibility for different aspects of their role than for ownership. This may have been partly due to a perceived implication that in asking the question the terms were to be understood differently. One respondent highlighted a responsibility for their team members and students, in terms of wellbeing and success. Another spoke about taking their contractual obligations seriously. One interviewee related an experience in a previous organisation where they believed their manager had not taken appropriate responsibility, with dire consequences. Another explained their responsibility for student success, achievement and enjoyment; "I take [students'] lack of enjoyment quite personally" (M37).

Responsibility was perceived as weighty: "If I think about it too much, it's quite daunting. There's a comfort in that as well, that there's value to what I'm doing" (M28). Some felt that course leaders were over-burdened with responsibility at Midvotech. "I think the buck can stop a lot of times with course leaders, but I don't necessarily think is right – to stop with me if someone was to do something wrong" (M16). Some thought that there was more responsibility in reality than set out contractually on paper. "I think I have less responsibility on paper than what actually happens in real life" (M95). One interviewee mentioned their responsibility for students' views of the reputation of Midvotech. They saw themselves as, "very responsible for covering up the chaos behind. So, front line stuff" (M87).

Responses to the third term of the ownership-responsibility-control triad ranged from the very practical – "Mainly I think I control my own area, my own day" (M47) – to a number of similar perspectives around the control over the "look and feel" (M92) of a course. For some, control had an interpersonal dimension, to be treated with care, and was actually a source of concern:

> I think long term I shouldn't be controlling, I should be delegating and putting more trust in other people. I think the fact that I don't trust other people probably dictates how controlling I am I think, so it's not ideal (M28).

Along similar lines, control was a conflicted aspect of M37's management approach: "I control more or less everything, although I'm trying to let go of it" (M37). Arguably, it is not unusual for managers to feel conflict around control in their role (e.g. McGregor, 2006), but a negative mirror-image aspect evident in the data was a sense of a lack of control. "My knee jerk reaction is to say that I control nothing but … trying to think. I guess … control within those hours within that room … control over each lesson" (M87).

M88 commented that, for them, control came from enabling their team to have ownership of their course. Other responses highlighted job-specific aspects of control. Some had developed particular conceptualisations of control. For example, M33 noted how they believed it more possible to control an outcome than to control the way a task was completed.

Linking to performativity, M44 took a different approach and referred to tools through which they considered themselves to be in control. "With feedback surveys I'm able to see where students feel we're doing well or not in an area." Another participant also made this link between the question of control and data or statistics: "Maybe the statistics I suppose, that's a big deal … linked into the planning and logistics of the course" (M16).

Spontaneously introducing a fourth term into the oversight section of the interview, accountability was an issue for some. For example, some interviewees were unclear as to how the organisational structure at Midvotech related to job roles, which were sometimes adrift from what was actually written down. "Sometimes the rub is being held accountable for something where I'm not 100% responsible … [which] might be something to be said about the structure of [Midvotech] in general" (M20). For M33:

> Accountability I see as different to the responsibility. I think there's a mismatch of those at [Midvotech], probably more of a mismatch than in other organisations. I think you generally are held accountable for things more fully in other organisations, but with that comes the power, the jurisdiction, to actually do stuff that could make changes and, you know, it falls on your shoulders if those changes work or don't work and you have to accept the consequences.

Both M20 and M33 perceived something in the structure that made oversight less straightforward. This was perhaps exacerbated by a series of management restructures over a number of years, necessitated by the growth in student numbers at Midvotech.

M28 saw control in a wider frame. They argued that control was perhaps more contingent and that Midvotech needed to respond to the *interests* of the wider community:

> So, when you think about it, we don't really have a lot of control over our destination really … [Midvotech] is here is because lots of pockets of [City] society are interested in this and this and this. We're not big enough to influence society I don't think – not enough. We don't get 11-year-olds into [subject] – somebody else does that, but we reap the fruits of that.

As mentioned above, it was perhaps not surprising for managers to express concerns around control, but responses to this section of the interview seemed especially rich. From interview notes, the notion of control appeared to summon up more emotional engagement from participants. Concerns raised appeared to be rooted in the *subject* of control – *who* or *what* is in control? – rather than necessarily control itself.

It is highly relevant to the study that the theme of control emerged from the research site itself, from the initial unstructured interview with Kirsten. Kirsten had a particular approach to leadership, which was apparent from managers' comments. There was a consensus view evident in responses to the interview question about how things change at Midvotech. Clearly represented in the data, many interviewees expressed their perception that Midvotech was strongly autocratic in nature as an organisation. For example:

> We're able to make fairly rapid changes when we need to, but 'we' is the Managing Director – it's her call … Whatever the directors think is priority is priority (M20).

> It depends on what [Kirsten's] vision is. That's what really makes a lot of changes here (M47).

> Having one person kind of controlling everything, that actually whatever they say is going to go really (M95).

This was accepted as simply the mode of organisational oversight at Midvotech, but participants highlighted issues with the approach. "When the owner decides she wants to change things … That's how things change; to get [Kirsten's] attention and then something will happen … and that's really bad. It causes a huge bottleneck" (M87). Whilst they agreed with the view that Midvotech was autocratic, it was not clear to some whether Kirsten herself was somehow limited in the choices she could make. "I don't know how much of that change is actually directed by [Kirsten] herself, as in her will, or whether that's the best way to react to pressures and forces. Whilst you may have some choice, your choices are limited" (M33).

For many managers, this perceived autocracy was balanced by the recognition that they were also subject to a high degree of flexibility, sometimes surprisingly so; "that weird level of flexibility, sometimes things are not pinned down, structure, solid like … Barclays or something" (M20). This notion of freedom as the virtuous upside to central control was described in more than one way. For example, Midvotech was perceived as having freedoms not available in FE colleges. "Sometimes we behave like we're a law unto ourselves … I can't imagine that you could get away, in a more highly regulated environment like a proper college, get away with doing those things" (M95). Those 'things' related to a notion of a lack of a governance structure at Midvotech, when compared with FE in general. Firstly, with respect to the absence of a board of governors at Midvotech: "The principal of a college obviously has the input of governors as well … and actually here, it's just one person really and whatever she thinks we're gonna do, because you kind of have to" (M95). Secondly, without collective bargaining arrangements at Midvotech: "That could never happen in mainstream FE – due to unions" (M92). This difference was also identified by M28: "I'm not one that would

support a union I don't think, but that's what you'd find at every other organisation, let alone FE."

A diffuse sense of responsibility, including an acceptance of responsibilities that are difficult to discharge, like the enjoyment of the students, painted a complex picture. The notion of control became a theme of themes that emerged from the study. Midvotech was inherently 'managerialised', an independent private organisation, a kind of post-NPM.

Kirsten owned Midvotech, which did not have a correlate in public FE. This was a different prospect than the custodial role of a college principal, so perhaps it was unsurprising that Midvotech functioned differently. However, and directly related to RQ1, this autocracy appeared to impact on the permeability between the organisation and wider FE.

Policy Permeability

A point of dislocation between Midvotech as captured in the research and the FE apparent from the literature was a lack of evidence of any significantly negative impacts or scars of policy. Policy appeared to be processed effectively, enacted or embedded as necessary without question. This was evidenced in the introduction of the requirement for GCSE English and maths delivery as well as changes to BTEC internal assessment rules, both relatively smooth transitions for Midvotech.

Based on the data, despite being part of FE, Midvotech did not seem to be typical of the FE described in the literature in this respect. Ball's view of the impact of policy reform was somehow split in the context of Midvotech. This may have simply related to the problem with *any* theoretical mapping or abstraction of a real situation; necessary but 'violent' (Ball, 2010). Midvotech was part of the 'privatisation' Ball's critique was aimed at, thereby perhaps reducing its relevance. Ball's conceptualisation was unidirectional, even though he admitted that "[t]he boundaries between what is state and what is private are blurred" (2007, p. 32). Later on in the same source, Ball made the point more forcefully about, "the blurring of the public/private boundary – indeed such a boundary is not so much blurred as obliterated" (ibid., p. 69).

Ball's focus was predominantly on the schools sector, so his argument perhaps lost some of its authority in FE. Incorporation had already blurred the public-private distinction in FE in the early 1990s, made more marked by the later reclassification of colleges as NPISH. The state retained only "reserve or step-in powers … limited to situations where an institution is being mismanaged or is performing poorly" (ONS, 2012, pp. 4-5).

If boundaries are increasingly blurred, then value judgements are losing their basis when applied to public versus private sectors. This could go both ways; Walby pointed out that, "[s]tates can be as entrepreneurial as private firms" (2018, p. 148). Ball acknowledged that, "it is difficult to deny that some education businesses do some things well, and perhaps better than some of the public sector, and do enhance the lives and opportunities of some young and not-so-young people" (2007, p. 187). This reflects the similar and compelling argument for franchising in FE, in spite of the controversy in the late 1990s, with regard to its value to non-mainstream groups (Kennedy, 1997, p. 83).

Midvotech was in some senses denied access to Ball's conceptual framework, being on the wrong side of the argument, albeit perhaps weaker in FE, given its roots in the school sector. The argument that privatisation was changing education itself may have been stronger for schools for a number of reasons. For example, public opinion is perhaps naturally more concerned with schooling, which is compulsory for everyone. Taxpayers may not actually agree that FE should be a wholly public service, accepting that flexibility in FE comes at the price of private involvement.

It was apparent from the data that Midvotech managers simply responded to wider FE requirements; a level of external control was just accepted. Some perceived that they had little freedom: "A lot of what my role is is governed by external agencies – I can't be as original as I would like to or as I could be because the reality is there's funding and rules and hours that have to be met" (M28). In contrast, some perceived that there were only a small number of relatively fixed external requirements: "Probably the two significant things that affect you … are Ofsted's agenda and their CIF and the funding methodology and guidance. They're probably the main two, if not the only two" (M20).

A number of different views were voiced about Ofsted, considered as a fixed requirement. Whilst seldom welcome - "Ofsted's just like ball-ache, unnecessarily stressful, just time-consuming" (M47) - Ofsted appeared to be taken seriously at different levels of management and across teams. "If there's a QAA inspection or Ofsted you can get anything done in this building" (M95). There was also a cynical perception that it was necessary to put on a show, which was believed to be the case across all of FE.

> Ofsted could announce they're coming in in two days' time and we would do fine, because we know how to pass Ofsted. You know, that's where you pull out all your lesson plans, all of your paperwork you don't use for every other session and you do the fun, shiny, exciting session that was always going to be at some point in your scheme of work, but you don't do your two-hour lecture that week. We all know. It's just everyone knows how to pass Ofsted. And it's a lovely idea that every single session would be that big shiny exciting session, but I don't think that is reasonable or beneficial to the students. I think sometimes a two-hour lecture is totally required (M29).

Whilst these fixed requirements were accepted, some managers defined their own more personal motivation for compliance. "I think for the inspection side, it is good to know the criteria, but not to live by that criteria. Like if you were living to try and please Ofsted then it's false. If you're pleasing them anyway, then that's more sincere" (M87).

Some participants were perplexed about what the government was aiming to achieve in FE, possibly relating to a lack of clarity around Midvotech's part in the sector as a whole. For M44, national policy had a straightforward impact, whilst politics internally was about student numbers.

> The government have their initiatives saying we have to do certain things – for example, GCSEs this year. How courses are developed also falls into that … We have to follow what's given and what they're asking … Politics internally is obviously making sure we have the students that remain on the courses and how those courses can remain successful.

M33 believed that Midvotech was in some sense invisible to the state, which had only limited means to make direct change in any case:

> I don't think the government understands what [Midvotech] is and I don't think they understand what is the right thing to do. They're working at such an

> abstract level that - and their agenda is so different as well – what they're trying do is improve GDP or the ranking of the country in terms of English and maths scores or ability. They're poking it with a really really long stick. It's not a one-size fits all thing.

M29 echoed this sentiment about visibility to the state in the wider context of FE, in relation to Ofsted and their appreciation of the real-world situations they made judgements on. "I'm not confident they actually know what real sessions look like because they only ever see the ones they put on for them."

Policy-driven change *was* visible in the data but was generally framed as something to simply respond to. A sense of disagreement, or agreement, around policy change did not come across strongly at all. For example, a number of research participants recognised the decline in the number of adult learners. Most linked this to the introduction of loans for 24-plus learners, who, from 2013/14, were required to bear the full cost of their FE programme, for which they could access government sponsored loans (SFA, 2013, p. 62). M95 understood the issue with compassion, but resignation:

> It changes the challenges we face … the older students are getting in more of a minority and actually they bring the biggest challenges, and because of the different funding changes and what students can access while they're studying, the more mature students become even more challenging to support.

For M16, the change had a positive implication linked to their course performance metrics. "I don't think I've seen the change in funding. Maybe a positive change; we don't retain adults well." There were similarly strongly pragmatic elements to many of the perspectives voiced during the research interviews. M28 accepted the limitations of resources Midvotech teams had available to them, and argued that it would be similar elsewhere, given the realities of funding and targets.

> The recent feedback we've had of 'they're teaching students just to pass the exam' – I was thinking about that last night – what's the alternative? Give us 3 or 4 hours on the timetable and we'll take them out and we'll teach them how real bus timetables work and things like that, but why are you saying it as a criticism? Yes, we are getting them ready for an exam. That's what a driving instructor does as well. It annoys me those sorts of things.

Costs associated with FE policy developments were visible in the data, but more related to increased accountability rather than significant policy changes per se. Many resulted from the strengthening of subcontracting rules, which prompted additional requests for information from the lead provider. Improvements in tracking necessary to measure success, driven by challenging targets for retention and achievement built into the funding methodology, had increased the bureaucracy in running courses.

For Midvotech, rapid growth had come at a more significant cost, referred to as 'growing pains' by participants, but not directly relating to any specific national policy shifts. It was difficult to distinguish whether concerns voiced at the level of administration involved in the course leader role related to more detailed and extensive tracking of students or the volume of students. M44 made the point that "when I started I was teaching 24 students. Now I teach in excess of two to three hundred per week." This radical shift over a relatively short amount of time was almost certain to make it difficult to determine whether changes in practice had a fundamentally local or global root cause.

Any visibility of policy concerns in the Midvotech interviews may have even been constructed in some sense and to some extent by the interview process itself, simply by the nature of the questions and explorations during the interview. However, managers' concerns were predominantly focussed at the local, institutional level, even though the frame set in the information sheet provided before each interview was as below:

> The aim of the research project is **to understand the effects of sub-contract privatisation in FE**. The investigation will focus on the perspective of a large and significant private training provider subcontracted to a general FE college. The intention is to make sense of abstract theory and academic commentary through the eyes of individuals in a real workplace, taking account of actual experiences.

The relationship with the college lead provider was generally seen as strong, which included keeping Midvotech informed of wider changes in FE. M95 felt, "pretty clued up", and made sure they kept up to date so that Midvotech students would not 'miss out' due to the relative sizes of the organisations. M20 agreed with M95 and felt, "very aware" through partnership links, although, "it would take us a while to notice" new legislation in particular

areas, so there was a degree of "luck involved." The data showed that policy changes found their way into Midvotech more through the lead provider than independently.

The importance of the relationship with the lead provider was recognised by a number of managers. M28 articulated the need for 'strategic compliance' to the college lead provider, demonstrating the perceived priority of the subcontracting relationship:

> I know there's a significant vested interest with the college, albeit a jealous one, we have to jump through their hoops. I'll jump whenever I'm told to, because they're the boss. I don't actually always agree with their standards. It's not something for me to challenge (M28).

The institutional focus resulted in a form of survivalism for Midvotech. Kirsten summarised the focus on survival at Midvotech, adding weight to the argument that 'strategic compliance' (Shain & Gleeson, 1999) for Midvotech operated, if at all, most strongly at an organisational level, perhaps as a result of its subcontract status:

> It's good that we're broadening our offer, but alongside all of that we're – I suppose we're sort of slightly now caught up in this competing with [College Name] … Very much it's for our survival and our partner college's survival really so … I'm not sure we're totally er … I think there's a degree of obligation now to what we have to do.

Mentioned briefly in *Chapter 3*, Ball believed this kind of self-interest reduced organisations' responsiveness to social issues (2008, p. 45), and linking back to the FE literature, Dennis believed there had been "an ethical excavation of the [FE] sector" caused by survivalism (2016, p. 127), identified in *Chapter 2*.

The overarching conclusion from the data is that whilst a perceived 'policy busyness' impacted on FE, the same nationwide policy seemed less relevant than more local small-p politics for Midvotech.

Summary

Midvotech was viewed positively as a workplace by managers but balanced by sometimes extreme contradictions. Generally considered as different to public

FE, managers were proud of Midvotech's impressive facilities, although it was acknowledged that reality could sometimes fall short of appearances. Midvotech was considered an emotionally demanding, high-pressure place to work. Data was used well to manage courses, but measures increased competition and anxiety. Performativity therefore clearly played a part in life at Midvotech, but any performative anxiety was balanced by a more positive motivating force and competitive spirit.

Midvotech is part of FE and its managers expressed a range of views about the purpose of FE and vocational education more widely. Evidenced, for example, by its ability to adjust to significant changes in BTEC, covered more fully in the next chapter, Midvotech appeared to be more agile than public FE.

Perceptions were mixed regarding the business side of Midvotech, and negative, cynical or suspicious views, reminiscent of Ball's view of privatisation, were well represented in the data. However, positive aspects of the business-education mix were also voiced, including the value of Midvotech's more business-like approach, perceived in comparison to public FE. Midvotech was seen as a business by all managers interviewed. The importance and function of funding was consistently understood, as well as the need to be attractive to prospective students to survive.

The growth of the provision was noticed by all managers. Whilst it was accepted that there were important external influences, including policy changes and changes in the college contract, there was a strong internal drive for change. Midvotech was perceived unanimously to be on a trajectory of increasing formality. For most, this related to the growth in student numbers. This had impacted on how Midvotech needed to be managed, both at the organisational level and at the level of classroom delivery.

All managers interviewed believed the most significant changes at Midvotech were ultimately directed by Kirsten, but this was offset by high levels of flexibility and agency afforded to them. This relates to the key theme of control, re-explored in the next chapter.

There were a number of views around differences between private and public organisations with differing levels of evidence to support them.

Whilst it was clear that FE policy had impacted Midvotech in numerous ways, it was hard to conclude that policy was as singular an issue for Midvotech as was claimed for public FE. This appeared to be because Midvotech's growth masked the claimed ravages of policy in wider FE. In addition, policy changes were mediated by the lead provider through the subcontracting arrangement. The boundary between Midvotech and its lead provider emerged as more significant in the data than the relationship with the policy environment. Any relevant policy changes were passed through to Midvotech through the contract with the lead provider, reviewed annually. Subcontracting therefore appeared to serve to limit Midvotech's direct exposure to 'policy levers'.

Chapter 6: Midvotech and Badiou

Midvotech was simultaneously similar to and different from public FE. Generally, differences existed at the organisational level, whilst the similarities were in the education delivery. In many respects, Midvotech was simply one of a range of providers enabling FE's responsivity. Recognising his clarity of thought and influence on thinking FE, Ball was used to assess how Midvotech related to FE ideologically. The mechanism of performativity was found to be most tangibly in operation and not wholly negatively. Marketisation and managerialism had a particular meaning for Midvotech. Managers enjoyed high levels of freedom and autonomy, but paradoxically within a strongly autocratic frame. Unlike public FE, according to the literature, policy was less of a driver or concern for Midvotech, the relationship with the lead provider and internal imperatives demanding more attention.

This chapter explores how Badiou might help illuminate Midvotech further, extending the dominant view in the FE literature, in which subcontracting is more or less invisible, without voice. Using Badiou, this chapter accounts for aspects of Midvotech which do not fit neatly into "the encyclopaedia of the [FE] situation" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 327).

The EGS series of lectures by Badiou in English on the subject of change became a key point of reference throughout the research. In the lectures, Badiou used a volcano metaphor for evental change, highlighting the unpredictable, chance element of what he termed singular change (2013b, p. 110). Elsewhere, he was clear that his approach and thinking incorporated this unpredictability; "But as my dialectical thought includes a figure of chance, it's non-deterministic" (Badiou & Tarby, 2013, p. 128). At Midvotech, a number of comments from managers highlighted a random, contingent or chance element operating in Midvotech. For example, M92 suggested something of an organisational chance aspect to change; "I get the feeling that there are fads here." Both M20 and M33 mentioned luck in their formal interview, and Kirsten herself implied a notion of wager, 'backing' herself, as she might a racehorse.

Methodologically speaking, the dimension of the research covered in this chapter had something of this chance-infused, Badiouian flavour, growing out

of an intuition, alongside an often-troubling *wager* that the intuition would bear fruit. Literally years of reflection, as it turned out, culminated in the insight around the 'figures of the subject' as it related to Midvotech, explained later in this chapter.

Midvotech as 'Bubble'

Managers had differing views on whether the locus of change was internal or external to Midvotech. Unlike most other interviewees, M95 perceived change to be gradual, but also noted that change had "obviously often been led by external factors." At a course level M16 didn't think, "there's much external effect on what's going on."

In contrast, both the level and rate of change was seen by M28 as driven internally. "We always seem to be chasing something bigger and better, which is nice. We are a technology college, so we need to be ahead of the game." Balancing this comment, M28 also admitted that the drive to be different was sometimes overbearing. "I think there is a stubbornness about [Midvotech] that we will do all we can to be different from the others and that's good I think. I think perversely sometimes over the top."

One notion, extending this internal-external conceptualisation, resonated strongly with my Badiouian reading of Midvotech. Mentioned earlier in *Chapter 3*, Badiou described the 'topological' nature of inside and outside organisations, with reference to the allegory of Plato's cave (2013b, pp. 60-61). Two participants who had experience of working in public FE prior to joining Midvotech used the term "bubble" (M37, M92), one adding the word "cocoon", with reference to Midvotech.

This bubble metaphor struck me as reminiscent of Badiou's set theory as well as his use of Plato's cave. It also felt somehow relevant that it was coined by managers with experience of FE outside of Midvotech. M37, "came from a real college. Coming here was like stepping into a little bubble." M92 expanded, "it doesn't feel, in some ways, to me, like a real college. What I mean by that isn't that things aren't done like a real college, but there isn't that institution – which doesn't feel attached to the rest of FE."

Both used the term 'real' to denote public FE, implying that Midvotech was fake or unreal in some way. To make it "fully-formed", Midvotech would need "to be a lot bigger - structure, resources, facilities, policy" (M92). M95 agreed that it was structure that was missing. "We're much smaller. We don't have the infrastructure, processes for stuff."

The 'bubble' of Midvotech acted as a buffer to the wider FE world, with both positive and negative aspects. Negatively, M92 admitted to feeling, "isolated from the rest of FE actually and if it wasn't for the links I have at [College Name] - that's when I hear the gossip - I would feel out of touch."

This bubble effect appeared to operate at multiple levels. Another participant used the word "cocoon" in relation to the course they managed, which, "can sometimes be insular" compared to other courses at Midvotech. Inside Midvotech, it was unclear to some managers where strategic decisions originated, with or without a policy driver. M28 commented on this explicitly. "I think that's probably a mysterious area really about far up the line does this decision go. I suppose when I think about it, I don't really need to know." The 'mysterious' nature of decision-making was also bubble-like, in the sense of reduced information flow across a boundary.

The bubble of the subcontracted relationship manifested as bubble-as-protection. However, the bubble had another face, apparent in the data relating to control, a kind of bubble-as-instability.

The subcontracting relationship influenced how Midvotech managers viewed the college lead provider. For example, M92 and M28 believed its partner status affected Midvotech's control over its own destiny.

> So, we're not able to make some decisions ourselves and there aren't some of these resources and facilities. And maybe, the fact that if things change externally to FE, it could have a ripple effect to us. Again, there is a feeling of being at – maybe not having absolute control … but then how does that differ [with being at the college] (M92).

> We're stuck with [college lead provider], we're stuck with Ofsted, we're stuck with the funding agency so you might as well just get on board and accept that they have the authority and we don't … So, when you think about it, we don't really have a lot of control over our destination really (M28).

M92 elsewhere used the term 'unstable'; insecurity and contingency were strongly evident in the data. Kirsten observed that, "we're not totally in control of our own destiny at the moment. I think if we did nothing, I think we'd probably struggle for survival five years down the line, so our hand's being forced slightly."

The instability or lack of control were not necessarily framed negatively. Some informants, including Kirsten, were able to frame the relative lack of security as a motivator or perhaps as a potential opportunity.

Contradiction

As highlighted in the introduction, managers cast Midvotech as a contradictory place of work, pointing out contradictions with quite a dynamic range. This resonated with the notion of turbulence foregrounded in the FE literature, but did Midvotech's turbulence have similar causes and nature to public FE?

Badiou contributed a novel take on contradiction to the Midvotech study. He related multiple apparently disparate contradictions to what he believed to be a 'fundamental contradiction'; ultimately the contradiction between being and event, which he viewed dialectically. For example, explored in more depth later in this chapter, Midvotech's perceived 'journey' towards increased formalisation could be re-read in terms of Badiou's fundamental contradiction.

Although perhaps a bit of a stretch, differences in how change happened in Midvotech compared to public FE suggested an approximate Badiouian contradiction, casting FE colleges on the side of 'being' or structure, or perhaps bureaucracy, and Midvotech on the side of the event; certainly event-*ful*, if not event-*al* in Badiouian terms.

Ball was critical of contradictions in policy and lent valuable insight into policy tensions, manifest both simultaneously and over time. The problem for Midvotech was that Ball's critique essentially argued to retain education as a public service under state control. As already highlighted, his numerous real-world examples were predominantly located in the school sector. Whilst that did not mean that Ball was irrelevant to FE, it was more relevant to colleges in the sector, better able to see themselves as public institutions.

Ball naturally brought a better grasp of UK education than Badiou to the study. However, Ball's policy focus was less helpful in illuminating Midvotech's contradictions, such as that between informality and formality, at an organisational level. Using Badiou led to different types of insight, operating in some senses at a more abstract level.

An example may help to elucidate this point.

Badiou argued that politics could be understood as the interplay between liberty, property and equality (Badiou & Tarby, 2013, pp. 15-16). In this view, the favouring of liberty in all forms of liberalism resulted in property becoming monopolised by business, through privatisation, and equality taking a back seat.

This apparent polarisation of equality and profit was not as simple as it might at first appear. Badiou maintained that there were indeed two poles, which he framed as 'tradition' and 'merchandise'. However, he cautioned against being compelled to make a choice between the horns of this dilemma: "Given the opposition of tradition and merchandise, to pretend that the enemy is tradition consists simply in rallying oneself behind merchandise" (ibid., p. 33). This argument was relevant to privatisation as well as standing as an example of Badiou's approach.

This move highlighted Badiou's care to avoid, or refuse, being ensnared in Manichean debates. His stance went as far as the radical rejection of political philosophy (Badiou, 2005c, chap. 1) on the basis that *real* politics was rare, realised only through the *practice* of politics, rather than through theory.

Underpinning Badiou's view of contradiction was his generic set, which was based on the *Axiom of Choice* in set theory, an axiom that not all mathematicians have accepted, so not uncontroversial. We saw earlier in *Chapter 3* that the generic set constituted truth for Badiou, something that could be "simultaneously on the two sides of contradiction" (Badiou, 2013b). However, crucially, what made Badiou's thinking different was that the generic set was not a *theoretical* reconciliation, like Hegel's classical dialectical method of thesis and antithesis leading to a synthesis. The generic set was a

possibility, worked out in a real-world situation by Badiou's subject. Badiou's dialectic had a particular meaning.

Badiouian Subjecthood

A curious aspect to the Midvotech data was how it related to the FE sketched out in the literature, with areas of strong recognition, but at the same time areas that seemed alien. The situated 'Midvotech-ness' was somehow at odds with the "encyclopaedia of the situation" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 327) of FE. The organisation had its own rules, it was to an extent independent of the policy context. It was a 'cocoon' or a 'bubble'. These rules were strongly driven and enforced by Kirsten, even though they were to a large extent not captured, bureaucratically, in local policy, perhaps enabling the high degree of flexibility identified in the previous chapter.

In terms of control, Kirsten, both founder and MD, was *the* major active decision maker and agent of change at Midvotech, as was recognised and commented on by most of the research participants. The unstructured interview with Kirsten early in the research process revealed that the mechanism for driving change was less than straightforward. The theme of control, which emerged strongly from her interview, prompted the inclusion of a set of questions around control in the later more structured interviews with other Midvotech managers.

Possibly because Midvotech was growing and was of a certain size, Kirsten identified an increasing degree of 'obligation' inherent in the "very complex relationship" of the local FE landscape at the time. For her, that meant that "we're not totally in control of our own destiny" and furthermore that she wasn't, "totally convinced that the college leaders are 100% in control of it" either. She believed this related to increased competition. The history of Midvotech had been one of repeated "reinvention" without a "master plan", but at the same time, "a totally natural evolution of what we do." Midvotech was also the cause of "lots of sleepless nights" for Kirsten. Most who know her well would attest to her total commitment to the larger organisation which includes Midvotech. However, again related to the notion of control, Kirsten herself felt controlled by the organisation she had built: "Privately, you never switch off. I'm not sure what other life I've got now. I'm just a cog in what we do."

The desire to 'switch off' was echoed by other managers. For example, M33, who admitted that they, "Sometimes wish I could switch off from it" and M28, who confessed that, "It was really hard for me to switch off when I got home."

Kirsten made multiple references to Midvotech's "survival" and her deliberate work "to keep us alive", touched upon earlier.

> I'm all the time thinking if we don't stay on top of this, we'll be out of work in a year's time. Whilst it's not the most healthy way of living your life, it keeps you sharper and aware of the dangers.

The 'dangers' she referred to were more local and contingent than driven by policy. In fact, in terms of the policy context, Kirsten saw the New Labour government as having had "a degree of stability." The change of government to the coalition was seen as potentially more politically problematic at the time of the interview, in May 2013.

The theme of control returned when Kirsten referred to civic life - "once I step outside of this building" - where her approach was more "influencing and suggesting and pushing and trying to cajole things." She recognised that, "All you can do is influence. You can't demand or control, but that's a lesson I'm learning on a regular basis at the moment."

As Midvotech grew, it occupied a more significant part of the local FE landscape. This was reflected in Kirsten's increased exposure to civic life, and with continued growth, the potential influence of Midvotech would also increase. This was recognised by others, for example M28 quoted earlier, who thought Midvotech was not "big enough to influence society", perhaps with an implied, 'yet.'

During her interview, Kirsten admitted to feeling doubt, a continual process of detailed evaluation, making necessary, "little tweaks along the way." She also used the term "back myself" on three occasions during the hour-long interview, implying a self-belief gained from experience, but also an element of chance or wager, linked to the lack of a long-term plan and a trust in 'evolution'. These factors are all important in evaluating Kirsten's approach from a Badiouian perspective.

At a more operational level, the development of new Midvotech courses tended to trace a more chance-oriented or experimental journey. Midvotech ran small pilots to gauge interest in a new course, rather than rely wholly on more theoretical marketing intelligence. Action led to understanding, rather than the other way around, which would be true of a more planning-based approach. A willingness to take risks was corroborated by a number of the participants. For example, M47 observed that, "[Midvotech] is not scared to pilot things. When we get it right we get it right." M28 believed this approach to be 'brave':

> We've tried to run courses that didn't happen. That's far better than not even putting on the table … That's what's brave about [Midvotech], isn't it? No one's sulking because there's not a [subject] course

Kirsten accepted that she might not always 'get it right', an observation only knowable from evaluation at a future point in time, downstream from the decision having been made. This points to a particular articulation of the future tense – the future perfect, mentioned previously - which is characteristic of Badiouian thinking. Something *will be discovered to have been* a success or failure. Badiou's appeal is simply to "Keep going!" (Heyer, 2009, p. 442), once an axiomatic choice has been made.

This process of experimentation was strongly represented in the interview data and appeared to operate on more than one level. This propensity to experiment also appeared to relate to Midvotech's informality. For example, M20 described their approach to new tasks, there being, "no formal getting ready process, just diving in and trying to figure it out as you're going along."

Exploring Kirsten's approach using Badiou's ideas yields valuable insights. Perhaps Kirsten could be understood as a 'faithful subject', in Badiou's terms (Besana, 2015, pp. 323-329)? There are good grounds to support this claim, evidenced in Kirsten's approach, reported briefly above. The chance elements, future perfect orientation, continual tweaks and reinventions, and the emotional impact arising from the sheer effort, are all indications of a Badiouian 'faithful subject'. The highly contingent nature of the development of the company as a whole, including the different parts of the group, also support the notion. There are also reasons to discount the claim, explored later, but the very 'undecidability' (Badiou, 2005a, p. 181) is itself an

indication of the validity of the assertion. The claim itself is in some senses an axiomatic choice, a wager.

Re-casting Kirsten as faithful subject led to an idea that Badiouian subjecthood might be useful for thinking Midvotech more widely than Kirsten. Recalling Badiou's claim that, "History is always the imbrication of the three subjective types" (2011, p. 98), made me question how other subjective types might have contributed to Midvotech's history. What part had I myself played?

From this perspective, it was tempting to categorise individual participants, assigning to each the 'figure of the subject' they most aligned with. This exercise formed part of the data analysis, with caution around the dangers of labelling individuals based on an hour-long interview. It was possible to assign a figure to each of the managers in the study in this way, albeit a little inexactly. From a headline analysis of the available data, two participants appeared to be relatively cleanly 'faithful', two 'reactive' and one 'obscure'. One participant seemed to be more of a reactive-obscure mix and two seemed more of a faithful-reactive mix. The two remaining managers seemed to fall into a neutral, or perhaps 'compliant', category.

Whilst this analysis was problematic in a number of ways, the exploration revealed Badiou's notion of subjecthood to be a fruitful analytical tool. With its use more explicitly in mind, it would have been possible to organise data collection differently, perhaps even using a different design or research methods.

The main issue with assigning figures to individuals is that a Badiouian subject is not necessarily, in fact is rarely, an individual (Besana, 2015, p. 324). There was also a lack of a singular nature to subjecthood in another way. For the sake of argument, consider that there were in fact *two* active truth processes at Midvotech; an educational truth and an organisational truth. In this thought experiment, individuals could accept each of the truths in different ways. For example; they could be fully supportive of the way Midvotech was managed but disagree with the way education was delivered; they could have believed that the emerging 'new present' was not for the best, both organisationally and educationally; they may not have an especially strong position on either; and so on.

Because subjecthood is most often collective, it was also problematic to have captured the views of such a relatively limited scope of individuals for the study. Whilst the tight frame of participants as managers served to lend clarity to the analysis, in line with the intended scope and resources associated with the EdD study, it was less of a generic set in Badiou's terms.

Midvotech's Journey

Whilst problematic, using Badiou did seem to lead to additional insights and ways of thinking the site. The previous chapter introduced managers' perception that Midvotech was on some sort of trajectory towards being a different type of organisation. It was becoming increasingly formal, which many attributed to Midvotech's growth. This process of change was strongly represented in the research interviews, across participants as well as across the lengthy period of data collection. Could Badiou shed light on this aspect of the data?

Managers mentioned Midvotech's informality directly, not always in positive terms. For M16, Midvotech was, "Not overly structured – sort of project based I feel … [Midvotech] is exceptionally informal – which I don't necessarily think is a good thing." However, M16 was equally unsure about becoming more like a college, "from being a bespoke college to coming in line with a general college. I think that we're trying to change into something like [College Name] and I'm not sure whether that's positive." This delicate balance was recognised by others. For example, M37 thought that the, "informal nature we used to have just wasn't manageable. I don't think we've got it right still. I see it as wholly negative." For some, this informality had a chance element, relevant to the Badiouian perspective, mentioned earlier. "'Organic' is a word that's often used … but there's obviously an element of luck as well" (M20).

The perceived increase in formality was apparent along a number of axes, including HR. The recruitment process was thought to have become more rigorous over time; "[I] went through the interview process – what it used to be like – it's changed now quite a lot" (M16). M37 saw the former approach to recruitment as a real positive for the organisation:

> The hiring policy was previously really odd but beneficial. [Midvotech] wouldn't turn anyone away without giving them a chance … That's done a great deal for [Midvotech]. Everyone that was there felt they were there for a reason. Maybe they feel they owe [Midvotech] for taking a chance on them.

Promotion was seen as idiosyncratic, part of the way Midvotech worked, not a predictable, structured process. Interviewees recognised the upside to this apparently unsystematic approach. "It's definitely frustrating at times, but mediated by if it wasn't the way it is, I wouldn't be where I am. I've been given opportunities more than anything. No difficult application procedures" (M20). Many managers had reached their positions relatively quickly. "Within a year and 3 months of starting at [Midvotech], I'd gone from being [job role] to being the head of [course]" (M37). M33 acknowledged the chance element in their own position, commenting that their role at the time of the interview was "probably more by luck than intention on my part."

Although some participants acknowledged that they themselves had benefitted from a previously less systematic approach, there was a darker side to the increased formalisation that some had been affected by subsequently, however indirectly. M87 identified that there were few options for promotion at Midvotech beyond a movement into management:

> Well, you can't go anywhere, if you're not on the management tree. You can't have a payrise for longevity or for deciding to become a specialist in something. No outward mobility … just management or nothing … very stagnating.

M37 echoed this sense of 'stagnation' with, "little progression in education … I'm not someone who deals well with stagnation."

Most interviewees voiced their concerns about Midvotech's growth, which was read as the main driver for Midvotech's increasing formality. Some participants observed that class sizes had increased alongside the growth of the organisation as a whole. Even though this was a phenomenon common across FE as budgets tightened, increases in Midvotech's class sizes were viewed negatively. M87 identified "how much pressure [the growth] put on the tutors." Other perspectives highlighted the impact on the practicalities of teaching, perceived quality and increased pressure on managers:

> Now the classes are 20 people thick. You don't have computers for everyone, or chairs for everyone and then people drop off because there's not enough space (M37).

> It felt to me that we were trying to grow so quickly without any consideration of the quality of what we were trying to deliver. And quality for me is paramount to success. If we deliver good courses, I feel like they'll grow naturally. Whereas if we're just stocking everything full of people, with no concern as to whether they're right for the courses, that has a very different impact (M29).

> It was a bit of an unsettling period, just in terms of change and the structure. It was growing … in FE. We'd started to notice the creaks a little bit more. It became difficult to manage (M33).

For M37, this 'difficulty to manage' manifested in particular pressure on course leaders. "If there's something else it's decided that someone needs to do, it becomes the course leader's job to do it."

M33 noticed that Midvotech's increasing size was affecting Midvotech's ability to change, its agility, linking change with the notion of control:

> I think some of it is just uncontrollable – it's of a size – it's a case for anything with momentum. It will plough a course – it will involve change. But then it becomes more difficult the bigger it gets to direct that change. You might be battling against all the inertia at lower levels and so on. You might say it's really good at change (M33).

Midvotech's growth had left M87 feeling, "like a really small cog in a really big engine." This resonated with Kirsten's sentiment, quoted earlier; "I'm just a cog in what we do."

I was intrigued that even though it was evident that managers enjoyed a high degree of flexibility and agency, they appeared to recognise little control over Midvotech's journey. Perhaps this apparent contradiction could be fruitfully explored from the perspective of Badiouian subjecthood.

Managers' perception of Midvotech's journey was often couched negatively and the following four (anonymised) summary quotes were chosen for a Badiouian analysis:

1. [Midvotech] was never very stable, but it always felt very loving and homely. If [students] were having a rough time at home, they could come here and be looked after. It still doesn't feel any more stable, in fact, it probably feels less stable … but it also doesn't feel as nice and loving and homely … I think a lot of people felt quite afraid to be there for their students for fear that they'd be breaking some safeguarding rules.

2. It's grown up quite quickly, so [number] years ago it was very small and I think that that sort of small community spirit; it's managed to retain some of that as it's grown. It's eroding obviously over time, because it's getting bigger … and that's just to do with the turnover of staff and, you know, the new people who come in … misinterpreting what the vision is, what one person wanted for it initially … Maybe it's just, when it was small, everyone was in the same office because they could be, so it was very easy to know what was going on generally … Because there are so many more people [now] … it's magnified the amount of stuff you'd have to process as well, so even if you could get everyone into the same small room, it would still be impossible to get a handle on what's going on.

3. I think we're losing what's different about us … When I first started working here, it was quite new and exciting. I feel like other colleges now do similar stuff. We're not the only choice anymore.

4. When [Midvotech] was that small … it was such an inclusive place. I think all the students felt like they were part of it, helping it be a better place … That inclusivity; it's really good. It treated its students really well at that time. It felt quite intimate because it's quite small … That's changed now … There's this sense of defeat that I feel from the students.

All the chosen viewpoints were in line with a more conservative or 'reactive subject' orientation, with a degree of nostalgia for an earlier incarnation of Midvotech. One of the above participants mentioned, "becoming very nostalgic" explicitly. The same participant also believed that, "There's been a culture change over the last two years – only those who have been here 'in the old days' notice it."

Each of the four quotes offered a theory for the root cause of the change. The first suggested that an increased focus on safeguarding had made teaching staff less available for pastoral care, with a growing tendency to refer students to the organisation's more formal support services. The second

articulated the logical impossibility of retaining a 'community spirit' as the staff team grew, especially if new staff misinterpreted the vision. The third posited an increase in competition as responsible for eroding the 'new and exciting' at Midvotech. The final quote, although less clear about a cause, suggested that students no longer felt 'part of it', perhaps due to Midvotech having grown from being 'that small'. The same interviewee spoke about what they believed students really cared about:

> I don't think they care that the buildings are swanky. They care if they're warm and fed. It's like Maslow isn't it. They don't care if it's beautiful; they care if it's comfortable. And it's not.

The strong sense of a change over time was the main reason for pulling out the quotes for more open analysis and consideration. The first quote implied a reduction in care for students on a pastoral level, explained by a better safeguarding processes and procedures. Perhaps this also indicated a growing disenfranchisement with Midvotech. This could be read as a move from more of a 'faithful subject' to more 'reactive' or even 'obscure'. The same interviewee disclosed that, "You'd be amazed at the number of people in this building who hate their job", in the context of assessing whether or not some Midvotech teachers were fully committed to teaching. This linked to the fourth quote, and the idea that Midvotech used to 'treat its students well', but no longer did in the same way.

It was difficult to assess whether aspects of the student experience might have changed irrespective of the growth in student numbers. For example, student experience might have changed due to changes in FE more widely. Or perhaps generational changes in the student body had impacted, for example, relating to the increased use of mobile and social networking technologies. Of course, it was also possible that student experience had *not* changed significantly, as claimed. Available data was insufficient to decide.

The second quote was especially suggestive of a more Badiouian reading, as it related negative impacts of growth with the level of alignment with an original vision – perhaps the vision of a 'faithful subject'. Whilst on one hand this was framed as a logical necessity, on the other hand, the suggestion was that 'new people' had a tendency to 'misinterpret' the vision. However, this could perhaps be addressed through better communication, although it was

suggested that it was related to a lack of personal contact with Kirsten as the company had grown, which was seen again as logically necessary.

Considering the quotes together, it struck me that Midvotech managers were not especially clear why the organisation was developing in the way it was. I found the second quote especially interesting in this regard, because Kirsten claimed that, "I haven't got a master plan at all. It's just, 'What can I do best now for the next year, two years?'" I was fascinated by the contradiction between others' vision of the vision and the reality of that (non) vision.

Education 'Standards'

The final part of the Badiouan reading of Midvotech relates to the educational dimension of the organisation, the aspect with most similarity to FE more widely. Ball's critique of the commodification of education is relevant here, as is Strhan's view of 'obliteration of truth by management' (2010, pp. 247-249) in the Badiouian educational literature. A number of Midvotech managers spontaneously voiced perspectives on standards in education that were not consistent across interviewees. There was no specific question about standards or quality in the interview schedule and the term 'standards' was generally left relatively undefined by managers using it.

Some managers felt that standards were high, which for M92 was a phenomenon linked to the high-pressure environment; "It is a more pressurised environment here without a shadow of a doubt. Standards are higher here, as an overall." Other managers implied high standards obliquely, via reference to lower standards at an earlier time. For M16, this was also linked to pressure; "I think the standard was lower, of what was being delivered. The teaching standard was lower, the planning standard was lower. The pressure is higher now." M28 also felt that standards had risen, for them caused by changes in the curriculum.

> The syllabus has changed. It's harder, more rigorous, I think. It probably feels more like further education than a small step away from what they do at school, I think.

However, in direct contradiction, M29 thought that standards at Midvotech had fallen over time:

> I think in a lot of ways we've let our standards drop over the last 3 or 4 years. Everything seems slightly slacker. The students get a slightly easier ride of it. The pressure seems to be off.

This was seen as a global issue. M29 believed that standards in education were in decline more generally, which was reflected back into Midvotech. M47 agreed with this perspective:

> Generally, education is at quite a low level anyway. It's not where it should be. We keep moving the goalposts to suit the students, instead of trying to say to the students, 'actually, this is where the goalpost is, you need to work harder to get there' – and for me this BTEC is saying that.

Here, M47 was referring to the tightening up of BTEC internal assessment rules, mentioned earlier, initiated alongside the shift to a new national qualifications framework. The radical changes to BTEC qualifications and how they were to be delivered were high on the agenda at the time of many of the interviews.

For some, these moves by Pearson, the BTEC awarding body, held the promise of a positive impact on standards. Some viewed the changes as a consequence of the Wolf review of vocational education (Wolf, 2011). M16 had noticed that under the new rules, "The quality of work [students are] producing is high. That's what BTEC want. They want to make the qualification harder and I, in a lot of ways, agree with what they're trying to do." M87 agreed that, "[Not] being able to resubmit until they pass has been a good change." One aspect of the changes to BTEC was the introduction of formal exams into BTEC qualifications, seen by some as a "step too far" (M88). This was considered a "problematic" (M16) way to judge or assess BTEC students, although another perspective held that the more 'traditional' mode of delivery, necessary to prepare students for the new exams, was beneficial in some ways.

Maybe because the changes to BTECs were generally ideologically welcome, the transition to the updated mode of delivery and assessment was smooth. M88 noted that at Midvotech, "it's been handled surprisingly smoothly", but the reception at a local FE college was quite different. According to M92, "Speaking to them about the new assessment rules is strange. They seem to

be absolutely panic-stricken about it. I feel quite at ease." This was evidence that Midvotech was able to respond well to change from outside, it appeared to be more agile as an organisation.

From a teaching, learning and assessment perspective, a number of interviewees identified what they thought had been a change, commenting on a move from delivering "an educational experience" to "getting everyone through" their qualification. For M29, this was linked to students' natural capacity:

> This idea of trying to get everyone through almost regardless of ability. I'm fine with people passing the course if they deserve to pass a course, but I've never really been comfortable with dragging people through level 3.

M88 expressed similar concerns, claiming that they were, "seeing aspects of a production line – they're just getting through – because of that they're missing the larger context." M87 believed there to be, "the pressure to pass students regardless of their quality." The belief appeared to be that 'real' education was somehow being drained out of education. M87 expanded, explaining that, "They're customers now, they're not students. We're not here to educate them. We're here to get them through and that's what it feels like."

The focus on tracking and an emphasis on attaining a clearly articulated outcome appeared to be significant factors in the perceived drive to 'get them through'. This was seen as a wider issue, not specific to Midvotech, as evidenced by intake to higher levels from other providers. M29 explained:

> [Students have come] to us with triple distinction star and then you look at their work and it would barely get a pass for us. The standards are supposed to be across the board.

Perhaps this was evidence of the impact of performativity on students' experience, the consequence of long-term exposure to a 'performative education'. In this view, students arrived at Midvotech with expectations based on their previous schooling experiences. They expected to be told exactly what to do and then to receive detailed feedback on where they were in the process of doing it. On the face of it, this is clearly not a bad thing in

terms of transparency, unless you subscribe to the view that there is a better alternative; an 'educational experience'.

The little Badiou has written on education, makes it clear that the role of the teacher is to organise knowledge in such a way as to allow space for truth as he defines it. It is perhaps reasonable to suspect that Badiou would agree with the perception that an overly specified, or performatised, education is no education at all, if 'getting them through' is the pedagogical approach.

One reason for believing this to be Badiou's view is a comment made by him in an interview about philosophy and truth with a number of notable French philosophers, very early in his career, in 1965. Referring to his approach to teaching philosophy:

> If not there would be no other recourse than teach a [particular] philosophy and this is what our teaching aims to guard against (Badiou, 2013a, p. 96).

Extending the Badiouian reading, wouldn't it also be possible to argue that Midvotech managers in this instance occupied the figure of Badiou's 'obscure subject'? Certainly, calling up the 'fictitious body' of 'education' to 'annihilate the new present' explained the lack of alignment with commonly accepted practice. Managers acknowledged that this was not a state of affairs peculiar to Midvotech. Perhaps this allowed them to allay their ethical concerns.

Badiou's concept of ethics is relevant here, re-invoking the theme of responsibility or control that is so present in the Midvotech data. The question at the core of the Badiouian strand of this thesis is whether or not Midvotech had any relationship to an event, as Badiou defines it. If it did, then casting Kirsten as a faithful subject is justifiable, and the development and growth of the organisation could be viewed as a truth procedure, building a 'new present' part by part, 'organically' - albeit inherently oppressive, as are all organisations, according to Badiou. If it didn't, then Badiou's ethics would categorise it as terror, betrayal or disaster.

The not insignificant problem of this Badiouian reading is the indefinability of an event, making the above dilemma irresolvable. According to Badiou, the "operations [of an event] are four in number: the undecidable, the indiscernible, the generic, and the unnameable" (Badiou, 2004, p. 103). It is

not possible to know categorically whether or not an event had occurred. The 'new present', built in response to an event by Badiou's subject, is *never* complete. It is therefore *always* impossible to know one way or the other. This responsibility weighs heavily on any Badiouian subject, the only guide being Badiou's proposed ethics.

Within Badiou's system, a subject to a truth procedure is predicated on an event having taken place. Speculatively, what *might* the event which manifested Midvotech have been? What was Kirsten responding to, when she launched Midvotech, the first part of the wider group? In her own words:

> When I started it I'd had difficulties trying to learn about certain what were then quite modern contemporary subjects in vocational terms. There was no colleges doing it. There wasn't even that many private training providers doing it at the time. So I think there was a 'let's share some knowledge' type of thing going on, but that's quite a low level.

So, she was responding to a lack in a particular subject area, based on something she had found difficult to learn about and so had a desire to fill the gap – or 'hole' - in knowledge. This fitted well with Badiou's definition of education quoted earlier, to allow 'truth … to pierce a hole' in knowledge (Badiou, 2005b, p. 9). Did a faithful subject build that truth in this case? Badiou claimed that an event left a trace. What better 'trace' than a lack?

A trace is not the event itself. The event, being fleeting, indiscernible and nameless, is impossible to identify later. However, in a distinctly un-Badiouian mode, perhaps the event that enabled subcontracting in FE, using the term 'event' in a more usual way, was effectively incorporation in 1993. Clearly, incorporation was not nameless, although it acquired its common nomination later. Also, problematically for a Badiouian reading, it was instigated by the state, so not a spontaneous or chance occurrence either.

There is an intriguing relationship between the attempts of the state to reform and redefine FE and the notion of an event as ultimately leading to a 'new present'. Badiou, however, does not permit the state power – or *control* - over his event in that way. Nevertheless, I find the relationship between incorporation, which is the contested cause of many of FE's issues, and the development of Midvotech as something new, fascinating, using a Badiouian lens.

Summary

Midvotech was described by some managers as a 'bubble'. This became a useful metaphor for thinking the organisation. An inward focus, a type of survivalism, coupled with the 'protection' of the subcontracting arrangement appeared to lend Midvotech its bubble nature. Whilst the bubble appeared to enable Midvotech's agility as an organisation, it paradoxically and simultaneously appeared to reduce the control it had over its own destiny, rendering it less stable. Control, in fact, emerged as a key issue for managers at a number of levels in the organisation, including Kirsten.

The metaphor of the bubble clearly had a resonance with Badiou's use of set theory. Badiou's particular understanding of dialectic relationships also helped illuminate, but not resolve, multiple contradictions along a number of axes at Midvotech.

Badiou's notion of the subject seemed especially relevant to Midvotech as captured in the research data. Badiou's subject had little to do with policy or its translation, little to do with the state, because the subject was the active agent, bringing a 'new present' into existence. This aligned with Kirsten's approach to leadership and her concerns around control, which could be understood as a struggle to articulate agency.

In some senses the notion of control was itself a contradiction, as evidenced in comments from managers. Ball's focus was different and operated on a different level. What proved fruitful in Badiou's work was its apparent applicability at a number of levels simultaneously.

Badiou's thinking on the figures of the subject was especially insightful with respect to different positions participants might occupy. Kirsten's recognition that as Midvotech grew control became more diffuse could be viewed as the emergence of other figures of the subject, with faithful, reactive or obscure leanings, constituted externally to Midvotech.

A Badiouian reading of Midvotech's journey toward increased formality was that the organisation was being formed by the interplay of contradictory subject positions, demonstrated by the complex and lengthy process of change.

Managers at Midvotech worried about educational standards, much like the rest of FE. Albeit from different starting points and perspectives, this was where Ball and Badiou seemed most conceptually aligned, reflecting the FE literatures, as well as the literature using Badiou's work in education.

The use of Badiou was far from unproblematic, including a difficulty in landing anywhere especially well defined or yielding explicit conclusions. Perhaps this was because Badiou's event was process or verb, rather than product or noun; think*ing* rather than a specific thought. However, through a rather inexact use of Badiou, it was possible to see Midvotech positively as newness, perhaps even hope for the future of FE.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Ball's triple policy technologies were key points of reference during the Midvotech study. In a summary account of neoliberalism, underpinning his technologies, Ball wrote that, "not all of this may be "bad" or "worse" but it is "dangerous"" (2013a, p. 130). Also, we saw earlier his claim that, "Risk, uncertainty and anxiety [are] in part produced by the market" (2006, p. 140). Dennis's claimed survivalism constituted a response to the 'danger' of organisations' annihilation (2016). The implied danger here was the loss of an ethical compass, assumedly part of the very nature of education-as-public-service, which was under threat from the market. This notion of risk or danger is a useful analytical device to help expose the potential of the Midvotech study.

In *Chapter 5*, I argued that Midvotech was effectively post-NPM, albeit in a process of 'managerialising' as it increased in formality, along a different axis to public FE. It was already marketised, explicitly operating as a commercial business. Furthermore, its growth was testament to its appeal in the marketplace. If managerialism and marketisation were somehow complete, perhaps the same was true of the third term in Ball's triumvirate. Ball himself claimed the three elements of his reform technologies were inter-related. Performativity, as Ball described it, clearly operated at Midvotech, with its typical accompaniments of competition, anxiety and personal risk, but positive aspects of a performative culture were also evident, at least for managers.

Interviewees, including Kirsten, didn't hold back in voicing their frustrations with Midvotech. My own frustration provided part of the motivation for undertaking the research project in the first place. In fact, a number (i.e. more than zero) of managers had left by the end of the research period, perhaps an indicator of a most extreme frustration. However, most remained, and, characteristic of Midvotech, many were in different roles.

Returning to risk, Badiou's subject incorporates elements of risk. The aspect of chance, or wager, and the demands of Badiou's ethics on the faithful subject lend a precarity to subjecthood. Turning Badiou's lens back on myself, if Kirsten could be cast as Badiou's faithful subject, after much reflection I would cast myself as Badiou's reactive subject in the 'world' of Midvotech. I

believe Kirsten would agree with this, in recognition of many years of healthy, creative and productive tension.

Kirsten herself used the word 'risk' in her interview, and other managers referred to an organisational willingness to take risks, for example as identified by M47 and M28, quoted in the previous chapter. From managers' accounts, the cost of the positives of working for Midvotech, often a source of pride, was perhaps in some senses *worth the risk*.

Contradiction

The aim of the study was to reveal Midvotech, and it was the complexity and richness of the setting that emerged most clearly. Based on the research data, Midvotech displayed an imbrication of numerous contradictions on multiple levels. In the original planning of the study there were three levels of focus, which helped organise my thinking of the research site at the time; the context or policy level, the organisational level, and the level of the managers inside the organisation. This mirrored the FE literature, especially the focus on policy and the related concerns around the impact of policy shifts on the FE workforce.

The same three levels of policy, organisation and managers are now a useful guide to organise thinking of what the study has found.

Firstly, at the policy level, Ball and others recognise the UK education policy context as itself contradictory. In FE, Keep identified two key contradictions of planning-markets and local-global and Coffield et al. and others highlighted a policy-practice contradiction. More globally, in VET there is the framing academic-vocational dichotomy.

Secondly, at the organisational level, Midvotech's efforts to avoid appearing FE-like, despite its FE nature, is somewhat contradictory. Also, the protection afforded by the subcontracting arrangement made Midvotech *more* precarious, rather than less. This protection-precarity contradiction related to control, one of the clearest themes in the data.

Thirdly, for managers and also related to control, the strongly autocratic leadership style paradoxically coexisted with high levels of agency and

flexibility. This autocracy-flexibility was one of three dimensions of contradiction identified at manager level, alongside informality-formality and business-education. The clearest indications of Midvotech's coherence with public FE were in teaching, learning and assessment. Related to concerns in the sector around how business related to education, the core contradiction in the Midvotech data was education versus 'getting them through', evidenced in opposing views on 'standards' in education at Midvotech and elsewhere.

One of the fundamental insights from the Midvotech study is yet another contradiction. Whilst the business-education dilemma was as much an issue for Midvotech as elsewhere, Midvotech itself contributed to the nature of this impasse through its very existence. A nuanced view from a real site contributes both negatively *and* positively, on both sides of Ball's attack on privatisation. This thesis deliberately *includes* Midvotech in FE, rather than accept the dominant FE college view, or in Badiou's terms, the *state of the situation*.

Using Badiou, these multiple contradictions do not resolve, but his thinking led me to appreciate more clearly *how* policy *itself* was a contradiction, even though this was identified in the FE literature in the policy-practice debates. As we saw in *Chapter 3*, Badiou constrained the status of philosophy. For him, politics was not political theory. Philosophy could not *be* politics. For me, this resonated with Korzybski. That the map could not *be* the territory was at the core of my epistemological position, as explained in *Chapter 4*. For Badiou, philosophy's role was to comment on what *happened* in politics. In the broadest terms, reading theory as a kind of philosophy and in turn policy as a kind of theory, policy could only ever have a dialectical relationship with practice.

Rather than seek a resolution, Badiou bridged the two poles of a contradiction through the 'monster' of the generic set, by positing a 'materialist dialectic'. The generic set, or 'truth', acted *across* contradiction, springing from an unpredictable chance event, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. A subject, faithful to the event, worked out the consequences of the event, step by step, to create a new present.

This was how novelty came about for Badiou. His claim was that novelty *was* possible and that there may come a time when a contradiction *will have been*

resolved - future perfect – but this could not come from knowledge. For Badiou, knowledge is the antithesis of truth. Of course, this problematises this very conclusion you are reading now.

Research Questions

One formal conclusory dimension is to explore how the study addressed the research questions, stated near the beginning of *Chapter 4*. Responses to the two RQs are given in summary terms below.

RQ1 - *To what extent do changes in policy impact Midvotech?* – framed the development of questions posed in the formal interviews aimed at relating managers' experiences to Ball's work in policy sociology. Midvotech was found to be both responsive and compliant to policy changes. Policy was simply implemented when necessary; for example, the requirement to deliver GCSE English and maths as a condition of funding. The subcontracting relationship appeared to limit Midvotech's exposure to 'policy busyness' in wider FE, but it was not possible to see to what extent this was true of other subcontracted relationships in FE or for a wider range of stakeholders related to Midvotech.

RQ2 - *To what extent can Badiou contribute to understanding Midvotech?* – prompted an extended exploration of Badiou's work, which was found to be useful in illuminating Midvotech but also inflected the study as a whole. His notion of the subject inspired new insight into governance and power relationships at Midvotech. Using Badiou also indicated a potential for ethical analysis, missing from Ball, for private enterprise beyond Midvotech, extending RQ1. Even more widely, Badiou's philosophical deployment of set theory lent particular meaning to the truism that accounting for more aspects of FE would lead to a better understanding of the FE sector, thereby securing the contribution to the literature.

The research questions functioned as navigational aids, positively, helping frame insights, but also negatively, highlighting limitations in the research process, explained in the next section.

Limitations

The Midvotech study was necessarily bounded. Whilst the data sources selected lent a relatively homogenous clarity to an inherently complex study – resulting from, for example, a more or less unexplored field, my leader-insider-researcher status and a challenging theoretical reference point in Badiou – this clarity was at the cost of limits to any claims from the findings. The range of voices captured directly in the study was limited; neither students, non-managers nor technical support staff were represented in the interview data. Perspectives external to Midvotech would have also enriched the study. Even internally, not all managers involved in FE delivery were interviewed, and even when they were, for only a single hour. A larger and more complex study could have incorporated these and other viewpoints; for example, parents, lead provider representatives or policymakers and/or even multiple sites, taking in different types of private organisation connected in various ways with FE.

Although the perspective of Midvotech managers constituting the data, which included myself and Kirsten, articulated a coherent voice from subcontracted FE provision, in line with the aim of the study, it was only one of a number of potential voices. The lack of students and other stakeholders in and relating to the research site was a weakness but opened up opportunities for future study.

Salim Akoojee carried out a survey of the multitude of private providers in South Africa (2005), but no similar survey exists in the UK, despite the dearth of real knowledge about the 'hidden FE' of private subcontracted delivery. Something similar in Britain would be a valuable contribution to understanding something of a blind spot in UK education.

Badiou was clearly an important lens for the study. A significant proportion of my Research Journal charted my struggle with Badiou over a number of years, grappling with exactly how he was relevant to the study. He was dropped from the study on more than one occasion, but my own personal contradiction between a strong intuition that Badiou was important and the formalisation of that intuition reengaged him each time. Badiou himself has spoken about this intuition-formalisation contradiction, couched in the example of a new mathematical discovery (D GCAS, 2014a).

I hope I did justice to Badiou's ideas and provided enough of a sketch of his thinking. The exposition of his work was necessarily brief and partial, weighted more towards his earlier work, especially *Being and Event*, for the purposes of this thesis. The 'figures of the subject' analysis was perhaps the most tangible connection between Badiou and the research data but the analysis was problematic in a number of ways, already explained in *Chapter 6*. I had not planned to use this aspect of Badiou when developing the interview schedule. Had I known, I would have approached the interviews differently. This stimulated reflection around another contradiction between planning and the authenticity of discovery in the research process.

There were a number of other sources of bias, listed briefly below.

Managers who had left FE colleges to join Midvotech were the source of many of the more direct comparisons with FE colleges. However, their reasons for leaving public FE may have coloured their view and their comparison. Supporting this suspicion, the comparative view of FE colleges painted by participants sometimes did not align cleanly with my own view or experience.

The historical snapshot associated with the data collection, albeit a lengthy 'snapshot', captured a phase of relative stability after a period of rapid growth in FE, which many managers would have been able to recall. Anyone joining Midvotech more recently might have a different perspective not represented in the research.

There were topics and comments I decided not to report for reasons of commercial sensitivity. In that respect, this has been a biased account. I accept my bias, both intentional and unintentional, and acknowledge my own influence on the data as leader-insider-researcher.

It was difficult to assess to what extent the interviews were used 'politically' by participants, to transmit a message to senior management, which was most likely the case to some degree and relates to points raised around power relationships towards the end of *Chapter 4*. Some interviewees explicitly contributed particular pre-meditated comments, in fact, they were encouraged to do so in the end-of-interview summary question.

There were a number of other potential studies in the data as collected. A greater focus on my personal journey might have yielded a more autoethnographic study. More quantitative analysis could have related a story more relevant to a different field, for example organisational development or management theory.

Including Midvotech in FE

Within the limits explained above, the Midvotech study reveals a previously invisible site. Albeit representing a partial starting point, contributing an account of a private subcontracted FE enterprise serves to rebalance an FE literature which is college-centric, despite the broad range of FE providers. The Midvotech project delivers an account of interlocking contests in a particular site, allowing participants in private subcontracted FE a voice.

From Midvotech's position on the fringes of FE, it appears that the focus on policy might even *obscure* FE. Is there a 'busyness' around the critique of policy, mirroring the policy busyness itself?

The Midvotech as revealed is much like of the rest of FE, especially in terms of teaching, learning and assessment. Differences are mainly organisational, in Midvotech's constitution, style and approach to governance. A less obvious similarity is in Midvotech's 'growing pains', which reflect challenges inside FE colleges undergoing the step-change in size associated with merger.

FE is not one thing, in some senses causing the lack of a satisfactory definition. The placeholder name of 'FE' serves as definition through negation; i.e. not-school and not-university. For me, this resonates with the placeholder 'name' of *set* or *multiple* in set theory, locating us in Badiou territory. Using Badiouian terms, FE is in some sense a generic set; 'a little bit of everything' (Watkin, 2017, p. 212). Despite many years of policy barrage, initiatives have failed to re-form FE's basic nature. Even without a name, FE clearly has elements of consistency, an identity, established significantly earlier than the supposedly-defining incorporation in 1993. The failure to *define* FE sustains a failure to think it.

Avis believed the deadlock between state and sector could be broken by a move towards localism. This global-local dilemma is at the heart of Badiou's

work; "my political situation was precisely the difference between localisation and globalisation" (D GCAS, 2014b, 1:01:50). However, a form of localism already exists in FE: in subcontracting. The legislation around subcontracting has matured, partly in response to the franchise scandals. For example, exemplar contracts for off-the-shelf lead provider use have been available for a while. The argument for localism incorporates a mandate for specialism, often also a justification for subcontracting.

Returning briefly to the theme of risk, the precarity of subcontracting for the subcontracted partner was visible in the Midvotech data. Paradoxically, for the lead provider, subcontracting has a stabilising influence. The cost of the risk lies with the subcontracted partner. The relatively hidden nature of subcontracted FE, with its precarious status alongside comparative freedom from FE-college bureaucracy, creates a situation more vulnerable to a Badiouian event. Perhaps the novelty needed to break the deadlock in FE is therefore more likely to emerge from the subcontracted fringes. This intriguing counter to Ball's anti-privatisation stance suggests that Badiou might have more to offer the FE sector.

Having engaged with his thought for a number of years now, my grasp of Badiou is still partial. Perhaps the nature of his work demands that it always will be. However, to my knowledge this is the first study 'applying' Badiou's philosophy to a real situation in FE. The *application* of his thinking made his work live in a way I did not anticipate. It is a particular class of theory, itself problematising what theory is and what it is for.

Badiou was clearly a fruitful lens for Midvotech, but his work also oriented my thinking toward a wider view. Through him, the study is able to interrogate and challenge the dominant narratives in FE. I argue that FE is what it is because of the difference it incorporates. In Badiouian terms, there are significant parts of FE that *belong* but are not *included,* with respect to the 'state of the situation'.

A Badiouian summary, then. Firstly, this thesis has *included* Midvotech in FE. Secondly, this inclusion is *axiomatic*, with consequences for the meaning of FE. Thirdly, these consequences are *incomplete*.

Contribution

The warrant for the research outlined in *Chapter 1* was fourfold and delivers as enumerated briefly below.

Firstly, because FE is under-researched, research carried out in FE enriches the understanding of a poorly or mis-understood sector. This thesis lends an insight into the richness of a sector that incorporates many different types of organisation to fulfil the FE mission. Even though the Midvotech project was not a comparative study – most of its illuminative value lies in its difference – it contributes a perspective on FE through Ball, Badiou and the commentary of Midvotech managers.

Secondly, further to its value in finessing the picture of FE, the study illuminates a particular subset of FE, that of private subcontracted provision, which is subject to the suspicion of other, more public, parts of the sector. This suspicion is built upon the belief that subcontracting is part of a neoliberal vanguard, a belief that this thesis replies to.

Thirdly, Badiou is used to explore a particular situation in FE. This is the most innovative aspect of my contribution, as Badiou has to date played a vanishingly small part in education research. Using Badiou has led to Badiouian discoveries or conclusions. The very contribution of this thesis to the literature *includes* Midvotech in FE, at least in the *world* of the FE academic literature. Whilst one reading of the preceding sentence is straightforward or even facile, the Badiouian senses of *inclusion* and *world* give the statement a particular significance, actually expressing why the contribution is important.

Fourthly, the study contributes an unusual leader-insider-researcher voice, of interest to future EdD, or other Professional Doctorate, researchers. Furthermore, relating to the third point above, in this particular study my positioning is inflected by the work of Badiou, further strengthening the methodological interest.

Future Directions

The two formal research questions are addressed as outlined above, but many more questions have been raised, partly as a result of the limited data set and what the thesis is therefore able to claim. Plausible conclusions to be drawn from the Midvotech study are often speculative, multiple and sometimes themselves contradictory. For Badiou, there is no end-point, no arrival. Nevertheless, I believe Badiou has illuminated the research site, with or without a definitive end-point. This mirrors my experience of the research process, which has uncovered numerous leads yet to be followed up, point by point.

Other voices from subcontracted FE provision would enrich this beginning; from other subcontracted organisations, students and other stakeholders, including colleges as lead providers.

The impact of merger in FE is not well understood, which relates to themes and concerns in the Midvotech study. A more complete and inclusive view of the constitution of FE is also overdue. An audit like Akoojee's in South Africa would be a valuable undertaking. I have argued the value of a Badiouian perspective, but there is more to be done to explore possible applications of his work in education. A Badiouian lens on other specific sites would be a rich future direction.

Drawing together a number of threads, especially questions from Midvotech managers around 'standards' in education, the end-of-philosophy narrative has contributed to the normalisation of a managerialised education, as argued by Strhan, using Badiou (2010), but also observed in Midvotech. The destructive force of this managerialism is at the heart of Ball's critique. If Badiou really has managed to reinvigorate metaphysics, a renewed exploration of the relevance of Plato in education is timely (Barrow, 1976; Gordon & White, 1979; Scolnicov, 1988), already in progress with Bartlett's work on Plato and Badiou (2011).

There is a startling breadth to Badiou's work and his illustrations of his own thinking. My fascination for his work has no doubt influenced the study significantly. Recognising this preference and approach early on, my research proposal promised a 'wide-angled' study. I tried to achieve a lot in an

essentially-new field, using a less-than-straightforward approach and two theorists, at least one of whom was far from an obvious choice. Poststructuralist leanings dictate that I leave space for the reader, which I hope I have done. I hope I have made Midvotech legible but also thought-provoking, both as a site and as a study.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Privatisation in FE – Research Interview Schedule

Preliminaries:

Rules of engagement - go through briefing and permissions etc.

XXXXXX won't be mentioned by name - it's fine to mention it in the interview, but it will be transcribed as 'Midvotech'

Similarly, any published detail will be adjusted as necessary to avoid interviewee being recognised.

Any questions?

Recorded interview:

Brief Biography:
How did you come to be doing what you're doing?

(A brief 'potted history' in 10 minutes or so, to allow me to link what you say as part of the interview to who you are and what you do; your role with respect to Midvotech)

General Context:
Briefly, what is it like to work at Midvotech?

How does Midvotech make use of technology?

How do you think Midvotech's subject area is important or relevant?

Do you have any specific examples where work-life has affected you personally that you would be willing to share (confidentially, of course)? How?

If relevant: how does your experience of Midvotech as a student compare to your experience as a member of staff?

New-ness / Novelty / Innovation:
What's new or different about Midvotech?

What are you comparing it to?

Ownership / Responsibility:
What do you feel you have 'ownership' of? On paper and 'in reality' - how are they different?

Is that the same for 'responsibility'?

What do you control?

Change:
How do things change at Midvotech?

Has Midvotech changed in the time you have been with the organisation? If so, how?

In your view, what have been the major changes at Midvotech over the last few years?

How do you deal with change? Personally and professionally ...

Policy Context:
How much are you aware of the wider FE context? For example, inspection, funding, quality improvement, ... How much do you think you need to be aware?

To what extent do you think changes or events in FE affect Midvotech?

To what extent do you think politics plays a part at Midvotech?

Has a change in policy (e.g. a funding methodology change) impacted on your role directly in any way? Perhaps leading to definable changes (however small) in your working day / working practices?

How have you managed these adjustments?

Closing:
Is there anything you wanted to say but was not asked, or perhaps you expected to be asked, in light of the research subject?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix 2: List of Abbreviations

ACL	Adult and Community Learning
AHC	Agricultural and Horticultural College
AoC	Association of Colleges
CCP	Commercial and Charitable Provider
CIF	Common Inspection Framework
EdD	Professional Doctorate in Education
EFA	Education Funding Agency
EGS	European Graduate School
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
GFEC	General Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HR	Human Resources
IPLI	Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the LSS
JVET	Journal of Vocational Education and Training
LEA	Local Education Authority
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSS	Learning and Skills System
MCL	Minimum Contract Level
NPISH	Non-Profit Institutions Serving Households
NPM	New Public Management
RQ	Research Question
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
SFC	Sixth Form College
StAR	Strategic Area Review
TLC	Transforming Learning Cultures in FE
TLRP	Teaching & Learning Research Programme
UCL	University College London
UCU	University and College Union
UK	United Kingdom
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-based learning
YPLA	Young Persons Learning Agency