The impact of neoliberalist government reform and regulatory oversight on private training providers in the UK technical education sector

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Abstract

Purpose – Adopting the lens of ambidexterity, this paper examines decision-making within private technical education providers as they attempt to meet workforce and UK government training demands against a backdrop of unprecedented pace of global change in technology.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data, drawn from semi-structured interviews of participants within a private training provider, was analysed thematically to investigate common patterns, clarify understanding and identify development areas to inform government bodies and private provider apprenticeship delivery practices.

Findings – The findings reveal the extent to which neoliberalism is potentially undermining technical education reform and increasing regulation whilst decreasing trust and reducing authentic partnerships between key stakeholders, together negatively impacting ambidextrous decision-making.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by the use of a monolingual, monocultural sample; therefore, a broader cross-section of respondents from a wider range, size and geographical location of training providers may result in a deeper understanding of the varying tensions and challenges associated with technical education reform.

Practical implications – This work seeks to inform policymakers of the wider consequences of neoliberalism and provide recommendations for government bodies and technical training providers to work collaboratively in seeking solutions to the barriers in delivering vocational training fit for a future-proof workforce.

Originality/value – This paper builds on a limited body of research examining the dual impact of once in a lifetime technological challenges and the consequence of neoliberalism upon ambidextrous decision-making within private providers of post-16 technical education.

Keywords Government reform and regulation, Technical education, Ambidexterity, Apprenticeships, Neoliberalism and human capital

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The longstanding acceptance and application of new and neoliberalist ideologies amongst the political elite has led successive Western governments to consistently operate on the principle that free markets, alongside limited government intervention, lead to improved economic performance and increased productivity (Gerstle, 2022). A central tenet of the neoliberalist hegemony is the notion of "human capital", whereby human activity is treated predominantly as an economic resource (Brown, 2015), underpinned by the continuous evolution of technologies, economies and government policies to facilitate further workforce efficiencies and enhance their collective economic worth through transformational educational strategies and programmes (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2021; Beighton, 2021).

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However, momentous policy changes across the globe have continued to narrow broader educative agendas to a myopic focus upon performative metrics, prioritising technical skills over transferable skills, revealing "a significant shift towards a neoliberal training and reskilling paradigm" (Grummell and Murray, 2016, p. 112). Concurrently, there is rising concern over educator and trainer abilities to maintain curricular currency and relevance, whilst employers themselves are facing significant challenges and risk in accurately forecasting, identifying and communicating their evolving requirements to educators (King *et al*., 2015; Corradini *et al*., 2023). Such tensions are well illustrated by the UK Government's 2015 technical education review, intended to reform 21st century skill delivery. Here, 34 recommendations were made within the Sainsbury *et al.* (2016) report, including splitting technical education into employment-based and college-based learning, heralded by an ambitious Post-16 Skills Plan which envisaged employers setting the standards at the heart of the reformed system, supported by delivery through financially resilient colleges and other providers (Department for Education (DfE), 2016). Yet, 2024 reveals a UK technical education system in complete disarray and unfit for purpose, widely criticised by professional boards and trusts (e.g. April 2023 House of Commons Education Committee "The future of post-16 qualifications" report; May 2023 Policy Exchange report on "Reforming the Apprenticeship Levy"; July 2023 Ofsted "T-Level thematic review: final report"). Increasing government bureaucracy has pushed employers to the periphery of the reformed skills system, with fluid funding policies threatening the financial viability of training providers. Consequently, non-levy payer apprenticeship starts have dropped by almost half since the apprenticeship levy began in April 2017, and both levy and non-levy paying employers are finding it increasingly difficult to flexibly train workers with the skills and competences required (Bewick and Gosling, 2023). In short, the UK's flagship reforms have led to reduced student choice and restricted opportunities for their educational and career progression (HC55, 2023).

The consequences of deeply rooted neoliberal ideology in creating a free-market education system within a complex public funding environment fundamentally challenge the resilience and financial stability of technical training providers, requiring organisational ambidexterity, the ability to innovate whilst maintaining ongoing operations, for sustainable operation and future survival. Here, the concept of ambidextrous decision making, the effective management of the tensions between stability and change, provides a useful theoretical lens with which to explore the dynamic tensions of the case organisation's long-term strategy, specifically regarding the exploitation of existing opportunities, juxtaposed with exploration for new opportunities (March, 1991). In doing so, the study builds upon the work of Katou *et al*. (2021) by empirically investigating the influences on exploitation and exploration activities in a dynamic environment, particularly the impact of nonmarket forces such as government policy reform and regulation.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the literature review examines the impact of policy reform and regulatory oversight upon the ambidextrous decision making processes of technical training education providers. Following this, the methodological considerations involved in this research project are outlined before the findings are presented and analysed. The discussion and conclusions follow, including an outline of the implications of the paper's findings for practitioners and policymakers as well as the paper's limitations.

Literature review

The rate of change of technology and the challenges for education globally

According to UNESCO, education is a fundamental human right and a right which markets should not be permitted to impede in providing the skills needed in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2021). Unfortunately, the context in which skills demand must be met is as challenging as any the global community has hitherto faced, described as a world in peril requiring decarbonisation to address climate change, democratic governance and effective

strategies for workforce readiness to facilitate the impending impact of AI. Reflecting these challenges, the WEF (2023) describes the next five years of skills priorities as: analytical thinking, creative thinking, utilising AI and big data, leadership and social influence, resilience, flexibility and agility and curiosity and lifelong learning. Concurrently, skills including reading, writing and mathematics, global citizenship, sensory-processing abilities, manual dexterity, endurance and precision are declining in their perceived importance by employers (WEF, 2023). These shifts reflect the global challenges previously highlighted by UNESCO, particularly the impact of climate change and the increasing prevalence of AI. Yet, the declining priorities appear to be at odds with the current technical education curricula in many western countries, based as they are upon more traditional neoliberalist concepts such as human capital (Bromley *et al*., 2021). This is particularly evident in the UK, where there is a significant neoconservative attitude towards education (Young, 2023).

Global skills policy since the Second World War, the rise and impact of neoliberalism

The devastation of the Second World War highlighted the need for global cooperation to prevent future conflicts and led to the formation of organisations such as UNESCO with a mission to promote peace, security and international cooperation through education, science and culture. Many western countries have also pursued more liberal regimes in the period since the Second World War, with the two-fold aim of banishing conflict and improving citizens' lives. Post-Second World War neoliberalism sought to free economic activity from the heavy hand of government whilst paradoxically providing the state with additional powers to ensure the smooth operation of a free market (Gerstle, 2022). Such neoliberal policies have also led to unintended tensions between the original humanistic goals of organisations such as UNESCO and neoliberal economic imperatives, such as market-orientated education and skills reform. Despite such tensions, neoliberalism is still seen by many as the framework which best suits today's global economy, based as it is on international markets. Then and now, proponents of neoliberalism argue that a free market with minimal government interference provides freedom of choice for individuals, stimulates economic growth and technological innovation and drives up standards (Smith and O'Leary, 2013; Nakar and Olssen, 2022). One free market consequence amongst many has been the exogenous privatisation of education and skills provision in various countries where a neoliberalist ideology has been applied. However, such privatisation has often only taken place after government intervention to create a "quasi market" (Holmqvist *et al*., 2021; Hoctor, 2022). Having created a "quasi market", many politicians have been unable to resist the temptation of manipulating their education markets further, with continuous intervention leading to recurrent restructuring events (Smith and O'Leary, 2013).

Whilst several writers have debated whether the neoliberal era is coming to an end (Gerstle, 2022; Major and Weiner, 2020; Bromley *et al*., 2021; Winlow and Winlow, 2022), neoliberalism and its underlying concepts, such as human capital, are often still promoted as unchallengeable truths, particularly in education (Naz, 2021; Winlow and Winlow, 2022; Cogavin, 2023). As such, its terms are often embedded wittingly or unwittingly in both government communications and policy processes, well-illustrated by the commissioning, chairing and subsequent implementation of the recommendations derived from the UK's 2015 Independent Panel on Technical Education (Greening, 2017; Naz, 2021). The consequences of such deeply rooted neoliberal ideology in creating a free-market education system fundamentally challenge the resilience and financial stability of the technical education organisations expected to implement Sainsbury's *et al.* (2016) reforms, requiring organisational ambidexterity for sustainable operation and future survival.

Organisational ambidexterity

Although the terms "organisational ambidexterity", "exploitation" and "exploration" were coined by earlier authors, it was March (1991) who provided the seminal concept of balancing the exploitation of old certainties and the exploration of new possibilities to ensure firm survival. Expanding upon the work of March and others, O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) defined organisational ambidexterity as "the ability of an organization to both explore and exploit — to compete in mature technologies and markets where efficiency, control, and incremental improvement are prized *and* to also compete in new technologies and markets where flexibility, autonomy, and experimentation are needed" (p. 2). Whilst subsequent scholars have offered differing conceptualisations and definitions of organisational ambidexterity based upon their particular theoretical focus, the core concept of managing competing exploration and exploitation tensions to ensure firm success remains. Many scholars have attempted to identify the enablers and barriers to organisational ambidexterity, but a theme that occurs repeatedly in the literature is the importance of shared decision-making, facilitated by work practices which inculcate employee information and knowledge sharing for positive innovation performance (Venugopal *et al*., 2019). Ambidextrous decision-making requires leaders to navigate and manage the evolving and often complex tensions between stability and change. External collaborations, partnerships and stakeholder networks are highly significant for an organisation's ambidextrous decision-making process, with environmental conditions having a dominant influence in identifying and understanding practice problems common to and choosing the right strategy to address specific issues (Peurach, 2016; Zehir and Balak, 2018).

The contextual and academic literature reveal significant gaps in our understanding of the dual impact of once in a lifetime technological challenges and the unintended consequences of neoliberalism upon ambidextrous decision-making within firms (Katou *et al*., 2021; Chakma *et al*., 2021). Similarly, there appears to be a lack of scholarly exploration and debate concerning the impact of such external challenges on decision-making within, and longer-term viability of, providers of post-16 technical education. With its concept of balancing the exploitation of existing opportunities and the exploration of new opportunities to ensure firm survival (March, 1991), organisational ambidexterity appears to present an ideal theoretical lens with which to investigate this case study organisation.

Research design

As of August 2024, there were 1,305 active private training providers on the apprenticeship register in England, and in the academic year 2022/23, private providers accounted for 62.8% of apprenticeship starts compared to just 19.3% of apprenticeship starts at general Further Education colleges (AELP, 2023). Despite their relative importance in the UK apprenticeship market, there have been few, if any, studies of decision-making by managers within private training providers delivering apprenticeships. This study adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach, giving voice to senior managers' and board members' interpretations and perceptions of ambidextrous decision-making within a typical private training provider delivering apprenticeship training within a highly regulated technical training market. The private training provider selected for this study was a small, specialist provider which has been successfully delivering engineering apprenticeship training on behalf of manufacturing employers across the North of England for over 34 years and is currently recognised as "Outstanding" by Ofsted. The methodological approach was designed to explore the decision-making context of participants and was informed by an interpretive constructivist epistemology, which enabled socially constructed data to be drawn from interaction and exploration of meaning and understanding (Easterby-Smith *et al*., 2012). The interpretivist paradigm advances the idea that the researcher and reality are inextricably linked and that knowledge is constructed through one's own conceptions (Neuman and Kreuger, 2003; Tolley *et al*., 2016). The aim of this research project is to understand, rather than change,

the phenomenon being explored and the belief that individuals are always part of everyday life and, as such, individual culture and traditions must be interpreted to determine understanding, which supports interpretive phenomenology as the most appropriate philosophy (Goldkuhl, 2017; Heidegger, 1996). A key aspect here is that interpretivism enables the researcher to generate "rich and textured evidence" and to produce a "rich picture" by exploring the phenomena from within, rather than independent of, "real-world" contexts (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008; Cameron and Price, 2009, p. 56). This approach is seen as being particularly well suited to exploring the perceptions and actions of senior managers in the case study organisation responsible for navigating the complex and dynamic challenges posed by government regulatory demands amidst rapid technological change.

Data collection

The research site was a UK Ofsted "Outstanding" Independent Training Provider (ITP), primarily delivering engineering apprenticeship training in the North of England. Access to employees at the research site was negotiated with the Chair of the Board by one of the research teams who is employed by the organisation. In terms of ethical procedures and processes, the researchers sought and gained ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee. Confidentiality was protected by a written informed consent agreement with each participant. Participants were anonymised by coding comprising letters and numbers. These were individuals who comprised the senior management team and the board of directors. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the groups and collection methods employed.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from all participants. The researchers adopted a relaxed, informal and open-ended approach with interviewees to create trust, foster rapport and facilitate in-depth exploration. The focus was on their thoughts, feelings and perceptions about exploitation and exploration decision-making whilst operating in a highly regulated technical training market. In particular, whether or not exploitation of existing business and exploration of new business were successfully completed, the manner in which they were completed and the barriers and enablers that impacted those processes. Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and a transcript was produced accordingly. Interview transcripts and associated documents were anonymised, securely stored and rigourously analysed for pattern, themes and meanings, ensuring ethical and methodological rigour.

Data analysis

The researchers used thematic qualitative text analysis alongside IPA to explore the data generated by the semi-structured interviews. These two approaches were integrated by using thematic analysis to structure the development of themes, whilst allowing IPA to shape the

Table 1. Participant groups and data collection methods

Group:	Description:	Data collection method:	Response rate: (%)	Number of participants
A	Senior management team (5 members)	Semi-structured interviews	100	5 (1 is also a non-executive director)
B	Executive directors (2 members)	Semi-structured interviews	50	1
C	Non-executive directors (4 members)	Semi-structured interviews	100	4 (1 is also in senior management team)

Source(s): Authors' own creation/work

interpretation of those themes. By combining the reflexive nature of thematic analysis with the interpretive nature of IPA, the researchers were also able to ensure that resultant themes were rigorously grounded in the data and thoroughly interpreted through a phenomenological lens.

The data were analysed and evaluated using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach of thematic analysis framework and involved inductively coding the data to help identify any recurring themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was adopted because it provides a rigorous but flexible framework that facilitates: " . . . an iterative and reflective process that develops over time" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 4). The analytical process began with the research team reading and re-reading of interview transcripts in order to familiarise themselves with the data, the application of descriptive codes based upon the previously identified ambidexterity theoretical lens to frame and identify common themes, adding layers of meaning through underpinning interpretive and pattern codes and then progressed by continually refining discoveries made during the process to reveal latent themes, whilst allowing sufficient time to regularly reflect upon potential researcher subjectivity and bias. This systematic qualitative approach generated rich and varied insights that go beyond mere description. Throughout the process, the analysis involved repeated readings of the data to reinforce reliability and required the research team to cycle back and forth through the material to achieve a holistic exploration of themes across the participant groups. This facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of respondents across the sample (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

The research team was aware of the dangers of possible bias associated with the data collection methods, which could have potentially led to spurious interpretations of the findings (Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Miles and Huberman, 1994). As a result, the team worked closely to cross-check the analysis and align sensemaking interpretation of the data. The researchers acknowledge that the adoption of general qualitative approaches means that these findings are not extensively generalisable but rather they provide insights into emergent themes in the field (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007).

The responses gravitated into two categories: those which had common factors, enabling clusters to form, and a significant number of "outliers" i.e. single answers that were specific to the individual, but which proved to be challenging to relate to responses from other participants. As the coding evolved, the researchers drew upon the concept of ambidexterity to re-categorise the clusters that were emerging into four broad themes: futureproofing the curriculum (exploration); collaboration with other partners and bodies (exploration); governance and regulation (exploitation); provider viability (exploitation).

The findings section begins by drawing on the data which exposes the opportunities and challenges associated with exploration and exploitation currently faced by the training provider. The researchers then consider how these themes build upon current practice and the extant literature. Themes and summaries throughout are supported by exemplary statements within the data.

Findings and discussion

Findings have been drawn from interviews conducted with the senior management and board members of the case study organisation, an ITP delivering apprenticeships in the North West of England. Thematic analysis of the case study interviews highlights four emerging themes: firstly, uncertainty regarding once in a lifetime technology and climate challenges is potentially creating a state of exploratory inertia amongst the case firm's senior management and board members; secondly, a lack of collaboration is potentially reducing the case firm's chances of escaping the ambidexterity "success trap"; thirdly, frequent education policy reforms and inequitable policy reform implementation may be leading to "stop and start" sequential ambidextrous activities within the case firm; and fourthly, increasing government regulation, is potentially forcing the case firm to spend a disproportionate amount

of its limited resources on meeting ever increasing government expectations associated with its existing exploitation activities.

Theme 1: exploration – futureproofing the curriculum

The respondent data indicates that there is a general recognition of the rate of change in technology amongst participants, illustrated by one respondent's comment: *"(What we still teach) may disappear and the digital world is massively, massively changing"* (FP). Allied to this point, there is also a general appreciation amongst participants of the more specific facets of future skills demands, particularly the need to include more sustainable technologies within the curriculum to mirror: *"Where industry is going in terms of renewable energy and low carbon and that kind of direction"* (BB). Yet, despite the broad identification of skills shortages, respondents were less certain of employers' exact future skills requirements, illuminated by a board member's unexpectedly vague response: *"There's a whole set of kind of . . . skills shortages, I think certainly in the UK with some quite common kind sort of overlapping"* (FP). When pressed to discuss the role of external policy in exploring this lacuna, there was further uncertainty concerning the various roles of policymakers, in addition to the extent to which consultation takes place with employers: *"We are at the behest of others who are looking at different models and not necessarily looking at what's required from the industry itself . . ..That is on the political agenda"* (ZK).

The findings here potentially provide a microcosmic insight into the inconsistencies and tensions between globally determined skills policies influenced by WEF (2023) and UNESCO (2021), which emphasise the importance of critical thinking, creativity and collaboration to meet longer-term, future technological challenges and national and local skills policies embedded in neoliberal ideology, which increasingly narrow focus to skills that are immediately marketable (Bewick and Gosling, 2023; Cogavin, 2023). The data also exposes the increasingly complex and challenging arena within which technical education providers are obliged to ensure that technical education is fit for purpose in the face of contradictory tensions juxtaposed with the technological pace of change, echoing the warning of Perrault *et al*. (2019). The analysis also extends the work of Bromley *et al*. (2021) and Young (2023), exposing the ripple effect of unintended consequences caused by globalised models of education reform and the confluence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies in education.

Concurrently, the desire to explore potentially fertile opportunities to satisfy emergent skill demands appears to be stymied by the fear of over-stretching or going first in an uncertain market: *"The risks there would be that maybe you've gone a little bit early and then you never get the kind of numbers or the market doesn't think it needs that yet"* (CM) or of basing exploratory activity upon inaccurate data: *"I think people are, don't wanna put the fear of God into people by sharing something that's not accurate"* (KH). This is exacerbated by the potential to extend reputational damage beyond one rogue programme to impact upon the wider organisation: *"If we went out there to deliver something completely new and failed miserably, you could massively impact the brand of teaching. So, you could damage your business in that sense"* (CM). Similarly, the data suggest that the focus on immediate returns is inhibiting longer-term programme innovation: *"You've got this really good idea, and you've got this new training to do. It doesn't actually bring any money in straight away"* (AC).

The findings illuminate the potential concerns of employers regarding the ability of technical education providers to deliver the skills training that they need, mirroring the research of Corradini *et al*. (2023). Similarly, the data expose the propensity for individuals to enact policies which only reflect singular contexts and priorities, building upon the work of Chitpin (2020). Such observations are in marked contrast to the seminal organisational ambidexterity definition offered by March (1991), namely the balance between exploration and exploitation activities to ensure firm survival. Rather than acting as an incentive to engage in exploratory activity in the face of potential new business opportunities, as might be expected

in more normal circumstances (March, 1991; Philipson and Kjellström, 2020), the respondent data suggests that the once in a lifetime rate of change of technology such as AI (Nosta, 2023) and the global peril represented by climate change (UNESCO, 2021) are overloading of sensory experiences of the case firm, leading to inertia on the part of the board members and senior managers.

Theme 2: exploration – collaboration with other partners and bodies

The respondent data highlights a general sense amongst the case firm's board members that there might be benefit from wider education networks but that the government is unlikely to be interested in collaborating with training providers: *"Could (the case firm) influence that group to be more influential in the bigger educational circles? I think difficult if the government's got a mindset, if it wants to do its own thing"* (CQ). Concurrently, respondent data indicates that the case firm's senior managers recognise the limitations of being a small organisation with limited resources: *"We're not a multinational organization. We are a small . . ..independent training provider you know, so obviously the salaries aren't gonna be the same"* (BD), and the impact that has on the case firm's ability to conduct exploratory activities: *"Because we're sort of running as tight as we are and I understand why, but because we are, you know, sort of staffing levels are so tight, we haven't got the time to do that"* (BD). The respondent data also indicates that the case firm senior managers have become less likely to engage in the development of new business opportunities: *"Opportunities so would be asked, you know, to sort of, you know, put, put something together about what we thought we could do to sort of bring new business in and how we could develop things. We don't seem to get involved in that anymore"* (BD).

The findings here potentially reflect some of the unintended consequences of 50 years of neoliberalist education policy in many Western countries, as highlighted by authors such as Major and Weiner (2020) and Sellars and Imig (2023), in this case the incentivisation of competition over collaboration in education markets. Here, the unintended consequence of neoliberalism is potentially further reinforced by a clear lack of trust in government willingness to collaborate with technical training providers. This view is reflected by many leaders across the UK education sector, as evidenced by recent open letters, such as Hay *et al.* (2023) and Knowles *et al.* (2023), which express a range of concerns about current government education policy and its ongoing implementation. There also appears to be compelling evidence that Halfon's (2023) view that the UK government is unwilling to heed the advice of UK education sector leaders is justified.

The respondent data indicates a strong reluctance on the part of the firm's board to engage in collaborative activity: *"If you're in partnership with a college, as I see that as you know, it's sort of, it's the first step towards some sort of merger or takeover or acquisition and then it's not really adding anything"* (CQ), and a belief that the best way to deal with competitors is to maintain a unique selling point rather than engaging in partnerships and collaborations: *"I think with the competition or the likelihood of competition in the, you always need to look for that niche area whereby you could be that sole provider"* (ZK). The respondent data also indicates a fear amongst senior managers about having to share existing resources: *"I think there's a fear of resources, and a fear of sharing resources . . .. and the fear of not being able to get resources because of the difficulties I've said before about around recruiting"*"(GC), and the difficulty of acquiring new resources: *"I think people are realizing now they need to keep the staff that they've got, and they need to invest in them because they're not out there, they're not out there to recruit. Recruiting is just a nightmare for people across the board"* (QB). Taken together, these board and senior management beliefs are likely to limit exploratory activity.

These findings potentially reflect evidence of the Sturrock (2022) survivalism attitude that has developed amongst educators in response to global neoliberal reform, similarly building upon Smith and O'Leary's (2013) earlier findings that a neoliberal regime will continue to

stymie the consciousness of the UK further education sector, reducing it to reactive responsiveness to market pressures. The takeover and resource fears, including recruitment pressures, described in the respondent data can also be seen as a cost of human capital. Here, Long *et al.* (2023) describe the pressure to perform in the skills sector, combined with increased reporting and diagnosis of mental health and wellbeing issues. Whether it be due to resource pressures, cost of capital issues or some other reason, by limiting collaboration, the firm risks losing potential access to additional resources for exploratory activities (Zhang *et al*., 2020) and consequently risks falling into the ambidexterity "success trap" first conceptualized by Levinthal and March (1993).

Theme 3: exploitation – governance and regulation

The data highlights a strong feeling amongst the respondents that government policy is biased against non-public training providers: *"However much they deny it, there appears to be a bias against the use of independent training providers"* (BB), and that the government will not seek to support private training providers who find themselves in difficulties: *"It's not protected like a college where the government will seem to step in and help if necessary"* (CQ). The analysis also highlights concerns of disconnect between government policy and current practice: *"This is what the funding rules need to say needs to happen . . ..But you don't actually have a lot of confidence that in the background, that's what's actually happening"* (BB). The respondent data also suggests that this perceived disconnect is discouraging exploratory activity in the case firm because of uncertainty about future government intentions: *"If you knew where the government was gonna be and it's gonna lock this in for the next six years, you'd feel pretty comfortable in making some decisions about, you know, whether we want to purchase a new building or do something else. But without having that, it's a little bit . . . not too clear"* (CQ).

Whilst the previous findings potentially provide evidence of the impact of decades of neoliberalist education policy, the findings here suggest that the UK government is not entirely committed to the extant neoliberalist regime. Whilst authors such as Naz (2021) describe how neoliberalist principles are embedded in the UK's current educational regulatory system, in this case Ofsted's latest education inspection framework, comments about bias in the respondent data potentially reflect an unease on the part of the UK government about private education providers receiving public funding. The findings here counter the view of Holmqvist *et al.* (2021) and others, who argue that exogenous privatisation of technical education is a fundamental outcome of the competition and quasi-markets, both of which arise from a neoliberalist education regime. A similar contradiction is reflected in the respondents' uncertainty about government intent, exacerbated by successive waves of technical education policy reform, including the recommendations of Sainsbury *et al.* (2016).

Analysis of the respondent data indicates a significant level of uncertainty amongst the board and senior management team regarding both existing and new business opportunities due to ever-changing government policy and regulations: *"Changing of the register for approved training providers issued, cancelled, reset, started again, changes to the regime of Ofsted inspections, changes to the, you know the government's approach to whether it likes in independent training providers or not. You know it's all its all moving all the time makes it feel very unstable"* (CQ). The data also suggest that market uncertainty is not just restricted to the firm and that employers are similarly impacted by ever-changing government policy and regulations: *"I think the levy has had a lot to do with it. I think it's taken employers, you know a long time to sort of get to grips with it and understand it properly and have people in place to . . ..be able to manage it"* (QB). The analysis highlights a general concern in the case firm that government regulations are becoming more onerous for private training providers: *"Going forward into the future, if you look at the, you know, the regulator's interest in independent training providers or scrutiny of independent training providers, the risk of you know of being caught out by one of the regulatory interventions causing us a problem"* (CQ). Likewise, it is becoming increasingly difficult for private training providers to meet government

expectations: *"We've jumped through all the hoops so far. But as the hoops get smaller . . ..they get they get harder to jump through"* (BB).

These findings potentially emphasise the corrosive effect of frequent and inequitable education policy reform and implementation, extending the warnings of Baker *et al.* (2023) and Hay *et al*. (2023) by highlighting the consequential impediment upon organisational willingness to engage in both exploitation and exploration activities within an education market. Respondent views are further magnified by the perceived market bias and control on the part of the government, echoing the work of Reficco and Gutiérrez (2016). This enduring perception of government mistrust of private providers and obfuscation of technical education reform processes continue to hinder exploitation activities, corresponding with the views of Chen *et al*. (2016), whilst a lack of clarity about the government's future skills policy disincentives the exploration of new business activities, similarly reflecting research posited by Hanifah *et al*. (2019). Here, the findings bring into sharp relief the requirement to devote increasing levels of resources to maintain existing levels of provision for ever diminishing funding returns, congruent with Jiménez and Boehe (2018). At best, these rapidly changing and competing drivers are likely to create an inefficient "stop and start" of sequential ambidextrous activities as technical education providers attempt to "second-guess" the government's future position (Zehir and Balak, 2018).

Theme 4: exploitation – provider viability

A recurring theme expressed by both board members and senior managers is a general concern about reliance upon government funding, which in turn depends upon an increasingly stringent regulatory regime, for example: *"(the case firm)'s turnover at the moment, it's about 80% funded training and 20% commercial training . . .. so some issue associated with an Ofsted inspection as we've already said or some issue associated with the funding agencies raising queries that could potentially jeopardize that fund funding stream"* (CQ). This perceived overexposure to government funding income and the associated sanctions of its associated regulatory regimes are explicitly cited as a source of concern for both board members and senior managers: *"If Ofsted gave us, you know, a grade four and then you know the ESFA would be, could take our funding off us, they take out you know and move apprentices elsewhere. So I mean it's a massive thing to make sure that we get a good Ofsted grade"* (BD). The data also indicate a strong sense that the current regulatory regime applies criteria that are beyond the control of the case firm: *"What I was concerned about as a director, was the high proportion of government funding and . . ..based on the fact that that could be stopped, reduced, delayed based on criteria that we had no control over"* (ZK). The analysis reveals a wider concern that any failure to meet funding regulation requirements will negatively impact the case firm's ability to generate future business: *"There's danger around funding, about us losing funding, you know, or inability to deliver, and also our reputation, cause our reputation, you know is a massive thing for us in the industries that we work with"* (BD).

The respondent data indicates a clear strategic awareness on the part of board members of the need for the case firm to behave ambidextrously, that is, the need to balance exploitation and exploration activities in order to ensure firm survival, as illustrated by the comment: *"The long term goal is for a business to be sustainable, there should be always a good balance between existing business and new opportunities"* (CY). This board awareness, however, is tempered by a general sense amongst senior managers that the case firm is increasingly focusing operationally upon exploitation activities, for example, for reputational reasons: *"So I think we just need to keep doing it well, so we can keep saying actually we're still doing it well, keep the success rates up, keep the retention rates up"* (BB), and for business efficiency reasons: *"When I first started here, we always dealt with, you know, kind of shop floor level, you know, engineering managers, supervisors, et cetera. It's now all very much HR, kind of procurement focused . . .. I think it's probably all down to money. Business efficiency too"* (QB). Some of the more recent appointees to the senior management team also highlight a

tendency amongst their longer-serving colleagues to favour exploitation activities rather than exploration activities: *"So with people who have been in posts for a long time, they know what the pitfalls are. But I also think that creates a bit of a blinkered mentality into what we can and can't accept for new business and what we can and can't agree to"* (PM).

The findings here reflect several potential difficulties associated with delivering technical education in a highly regulated education market, particularly for smaller training providers with limited resources, illuminating the issues raised by Baaziz (2019) concerning a lack of public institution support. Extant market challenges juxtaposed with increasing government regulation and policy regimes (e.g. see Greening, 2017; Naz, 2021) require disproportionate resources merely devoted to exploitation activities (Senaratne and Wang, 2018). Equally, these conditions serve to divert a training provider's resources away from exploratory activities. The exposure of unique exploratory barriers such as spending cuts and bureaucracy and negative bias and clientelism reflect the warnings of Senaratne and Wang (2018), Reficco and Gutiérrez (2016) and Xia and Liu (2022). Although driven by regulatory requirements rather than a desire to achieve greater returns from existing business, the findings here present another example of the "success trap" first identified by Levinthal and March (1993). In short, the regulatory burden associated with the UK education market has potentially helped create a situation where increasing numbers of private technical training providers are simply unable to maintain business sustainability, leading to increasing numbers of such providers exiting the skills market altogether (Hay *et al.*, 2023).

Conclusions

The research here provides an insight into how government reform practices may negatively influence ambidextrous decision-making by leaders of technical training providers. In adopting phenomenological thematic analysis and utilising the concept of organisational ambidexterity, the research exposes the varying facets of the decision-making experience for individual senior managers and board members as they navigate a range of complex tensions, ultimately supporting the identification of broader themes which may also be applicable in similar technical training provider organisations in the UK and across the globe.

Three significant factors have potentially combined to create a negative feedback scenario, which is reducing technical education provision at a time when the global community is facing a once in a lifetime skills challenge. Widespread provider and employer uncertainty about digital and sustainable skills requirements, reduced provider collaboration after decades of neoliberalist education policy, and frequent changes to education regulation have all combined to reduce market opportunities for technical education providers, which in turn has led to an ongoing decline in the number of technical education providers, particularly in the private sector.

The use of organisational ambidexterity as a lens through which to study this phenomenon has shed light on how all three factors above might be acting as barriers to the exploration of new business and that government regulation may additionally be acting as a barrier to the exploitation of existing business. The work here lends currency to Hay *et al.*'s (2023) gloomy predictions of a decline in provision, reaping disastrous consequences for post-16 technical education in terms of choice, quality and currency of training provision. Concurrently, survivalism and exploitation are evident throughout all levels of UK education, with nursery to university provision increasingly entrenched in neoliberalist bureaucracy and gripped by funding paralysis, together preventing any notion of exploratory activities. The potentially significant barriers identified in this study may also be creating a cost to human capital, including mental health issues for existing staff and difficulties in recruiting new staff and leading to increasingly stop/start sequential ambidextrous behaviour on the part of technical education providers. Ultimately, however, unless these potential barriers are mitigated, they are likely to force increasing numbers of technical education providers out of the funded skills market to ensure firm survival.

Limitations

Despite generating novel and interesting insights, the authors recognise the limitations of this study. Due to its exploratory nature, it is not intended to provide a generalisable detailed analysis of technical training provider experiences and perceptions of implementing the UK's technical education reforms. Instead, it is intended to provide rich and descriptive insights into subjective human phenomena as participants engage with and aim to deliver technical training programmes within the contrasting tensions of free market operation juxtaposed with increasingly restrictive policy frameworks. Equally, it is important to note that the research was carried out during 2023; therefore, the respondents themselves were operating in one specific technical training provider context within an unprecedented turbulent operating environment impacted by funding austerity, technological evolution and the sustainability agenda, all of which will have considerably influenced the findings.

Moreover, this study is limited by the use of a monolingual, monocultural sample, which focuses exclusively on the senior management team and the board of directors from the case organisation; therefore, a broader cross-section of respondents from a wider range, size and geographical location of training providers, including different technical specialists at different levels of the organisation, may result in a deeper understanding of the varying tensions and challenges associated with technical education reform. Future studies would also benefit from incorporating the employer and student views in conjunction with those of the provider. Proactive investment in ongoing research of this nature is recommended to help policymakers, professional bodies, employers and training providers to collaboratively reconstruct a deeper understanding of the challenges and benefits of current educational policies, agree on common goals and ensure that all stakeholder voices are accounted for in meeting future reform, collectively developing and modelling cultures of integrity and trust.

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