The use of comparative numerical data plays a significant role in Further Education (FE) and has since the inception of its current marketised form (Jephcote 1996). Metrics have become central in making FE more ‘responsive’ to on-going government reforms positioning it as a flexible skills provider for industrial needs and this has privileged managerialist cultures (James and Biesta 2007). Metrics address the policy makers’ need for ‘legibility’ (Scott 1998) and are enshrined in the funding methodology - a mechanism that sought from the outset to fund colleges by measuring their activities against specific criteria. Within colleges, metrics are also used as an integral aspect of performance management and lie at the heart of quality systems. However, policy literature (e.g. Wolf 2011), research literature (e.g. O’Leary and Smith 2012) and key stakeholders (e.g. 157 group) have identified how performative cultures lead to ‘gaming’ and data ‘fabrication’ that seriously undermine the educational purpose of FE. While there is broad recognition of the need for accountability in education (Rustin 2013), current models of ‘legibility’ are problematic.

With this policy context as its backdrop, this paper is based on a qualitative research study enquiring into the attitudes of teachers and managers in colleges across England on the integrity of performance and market information. More than fifty participants were anonymously surveyed and asked to comment on their awareness of data manipulation and on links between this and college culture / leadership. Initial findings were that individual awareness of the issue is very widespread but that institutional recognition is much rarer. Performativity and cultures of ‘managerialist positivism’ (Smith and O’Leary 2013) in colleges were seen to coincide with a deep division between teachers’ and managers’ roles. The paper theorises on the consequences of an over-reliance on specious data within the existing marketised sector and, drawing on the concept of ‘critical realism’ (Bhaskar 2011), urges a reconnecting of management and leadership functions with the realities of teaching. It concludes that two decades of incorporation appear to have created a market environment in which colleges have refined cultures and practices of knowledge production that blur any distinction between ‘market information’ and ‘market advice’. Consequently, it suggests that data is likely to become increasingly politicised in the FE sector and any quest for ‘neutral’ and/or transparent data within the existing market is unlikely to be successful.