

Policy, learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector

Created in 2001, the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) has received increased funding and demonstrated considerable achievements, but still faces major challenges. This project examined the impact of policy on learning and inclusion for three groups of disadvantaged learners: adult basic skills learners in the community; adults in the workplace; and Level 1 and 2 learners in further education colleges. We studied the impact of five policy levers: targets, funding, planning, inspection, and policy initiatives such as *Skills for Life*.

- The LSS is undergoing a fundamental shift from an area planning approach to a market model of a 'demand-led' system. → This is a high-risk strategy that may destabilise institutions and exclude some of the most disadvantaged groups of learners.
- Top-down funding and targets have high costs and unpredictable outcomes and leave little room for responsiveness to local conditions. → A new settlement is needed between national, regional and local decision-making, based on social partnership, local discretion, innovation and democracy.
- Practitioners face too many changes, introduced too quickly, with too much bureaucracy, all of which divert them from teaching and learning. → Change should incorporate professional participation and feedback, reflection and gradualism, to balance sustainability and innovation.
- Learners described their relationships with tutors as the key to their learning, progress and success. → It's not simply learners who are at the heart of the system, but the learner-tutor relationship. Policy needs to recognise and support this.
- Despite increased investment, considerable inequity persists, both within the LSS itself, and between the LSS, schools and higher education. → Equity should be as high a priority as efficiency or effectiveness, with disadvantaged groups receiving greater resources.

The research

Our project, *The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector (LSS)*, set out in 2004 to evaluate the impact of five policy levers on learning and inclusion, and to identify the main features of more equitable and inclusive local learning systems. Against a background of considerable policy activity in the LSS, we investigated the evolving roles of, and relationships between, the main partners in the sector, and explored the impact on three key groups of learners: young people in Further Education (FE) colleges on Level 1 or Level 2 courses; adults on basic skills courses in adult community learning; and employees on basic skills courses in work-based learning. In two very different regions, London and North East England, we tracked courses in 24 learning sites: eight in FE, eight adult courses in the community, and eight workplace learning sites, talking to learners, tutors and managers. Alongside this fieldwork, we undertook analysis of policy documents, a survey and 131 interviews with policy makers and other key players. Figure 1 shows the range of participants at different levels in the sector, those who make policy, those who enact it and those whose work and learning are affected by it.

Policy

The Learning and Skills Act 2000 created a unified sector for the planning and funding of all state-funded post-16 education and training outside higher education for the first time in England. Responsibility for the sector was given to the new Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and was accompanied by significant additional investment in the sector, increasing from £5.5 billion in 2001/02 to £11.4 billion in 2007/08. Despite rising levels of participation in learning among 16-19 year olds, record numbers of apprenticeships and rising success rates, some significant problems remain. The

most radical policy shift, towards a 'demand-led' system, follows from the 2006 Leitch Review of Skills but is not yet well understood by many players in the LSS. The strong emphasis on area-based planning at the beginning of our research period has been replaced by widespread uncertainty about how, and even whether, a system led by employer and individual demand can work. There is also doubt about whether provision for learners who are expensive to train (for example in construction and engineering), who are not in a priority group or who live in sparsely populated areas will survive in the new climate.

Top-down policy and micro-management from the centre have brought high costs and are not creating a coherent, self-improving skills system. We looked at the impact of five major policy mechanisms: funding, targets, planning, inspection, and initiatives such as *Skills for Life* and *Train to Gain*. Although these policy levers, singly and in combination, have helped in the achievement of targets set by Government, particularly when funding accompanies them, many unintended, unpredictable and even perverse outcomes were reported. For example, tutors and managers feared that the linkage between funding and targets for achievement at Level 1 and Level 2 in *Skills for Life* was threatening provision for learners at lower levels. We also saw how provision which combined basic skills with other crafts was slashed in centres where such courses had fostered inclusion and provided hope and progression for deprived communities. Basic Skills initiatives in the workplace and community also lacked sustainable funding. Providers felt constrained by national targets which were handed down by the LSC with little room for local negotiation. And even before the policy emphasis on 'demand-led' provision, they struggled to plan for the medium to long term because of the annual funding cycle and changing policy priorities.

The sector suffers from too much centrally driven change, too many initiatives, and too many policies. This creates instability

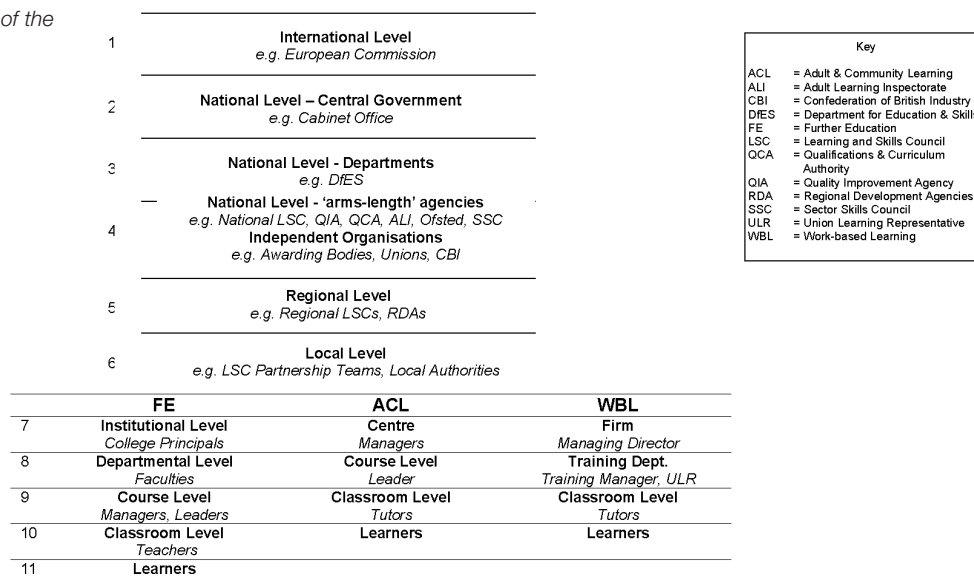
for learners and for institutions. The pace of change and the proliferation of initiatives have been intense, and changes to targets, funding rules and paperwork within initiatives such as *Skills for Life* have diverted staff attention away from the central task of teaching. Although efforts have undoubtedly been made to reduce paperwork and bureaucracy, especially in the area of inspection, it is still eating into professionals' time and energy for teaching, preparation and assessment.

The LSC, in common with other organisations in the sector, has itself been through substantial changes of direction and structure since 2001. It is still too early to say whether, following the latest re-organisation, the Local Partnership Teams will prove to be effective at reconciling the competing demands of 'market making', national priorities and regional and local planning.

Teaching and Learning

How have professionals working in the sector coped with this policy turbulence? Many at different levels in the system have tried to mediate and translate policy to protect their local learners and institutions, but many are unhappy with the burdens of paperwork and some have left their posts. At tutor level, staff were uncertain whether the requirements they were meeting were dictated by government policy, the LSC or their local college management. In our project seminars which brought together teaching professionals with DfES and LSC officials, participants were sometimes startled by the different interpretations placed on the same policy by individuals at different levels in the system. Most teaching staff tried hard to comply with policy requirements, in order to maximise their resources, but regretted that the pressure to achieve targets for funding sometimes constrained them, or, in the case of *Skills for Life*, obliged them to 'teach to the test', instead of being more creative in meeting learners' individual needs. Many expressed frustration at the

Figure 1: The levels of the sector we studied



lack of opportunities to give feedback to policy-makers and some were very angry that their views, reflecting the needs of their learners and their understanding of local conditions and labour markets, were not heeded.

Learners are the intended beneficiaries of policy and almost all of the hundreds we interviewed were very positive about their current experience of learning. *Skills for Life* provision in the community and the workplace was particularly appreciated, although concerns emerged about progression thereafter, especially as we witnessed the abrupt decline of other provision for adults in some centres. The *Education Maintenance Allowance* (EMA) made a difference to those young learners who qualified for it, although it also created resentment amongst those who were ineligible. While increased funding and initiatives such as *Skills for Life* and *EMA* have had a largely positive impact, we found some evidence that the pressure to meet targets led to learning that was more narrow, instrumental and mechanical – prompting one *Skills for Life* manager to ask ‘*Skills for whose life?*’. The strongest message from learners was the central importance of their positive relationships with tutors, which many contrasted with their negative experiences at school. For learners of any age who had been poorly served by their schooling, a tutor who gave them respect, confidence and self-belief could help them achieve where in the past they had failed. This is a considerable achievement for tutors working with students whom no-one else wants to teach.

Inclusion

The substantial increase in funding for the LSS in the last ten years has undoubtedly had positive impacts on inclusion, but inequity persists. The facilities available to learners in community education and the workplace, and the salaries and conditions of their tutors, compare badly with the equivalent in FE colleges. They, in turn, are less generously funded than higher education and even schools, which leads to difficulties in staff recruitment. Target-driven funding in *Skills for Life* led to widespread concerns about provision for learners with learning difficulties and those whose progression between levels was slow. Senior managers in colleges expressed fears that increased contestability (opportunities for new high quality providers to enter the market) and competition would threaten the stability of FE colleges, although independent training providers welcomed the opening up of this new market. A major concern was that the introduction of more competition will not help disadvantaged learners, who are more costly to work with and with whom positive outcomes are less certain, and those in rural areas. As one survey respondent suggested, demand-led systems may ‘*benefit those that can demand - employers, well-educated consumers - and work against the interests of the inarticulate and under-educated*’.

Major implications

Learners are in no doubt about the central importance of the learner-tutor relationship. Its significance needs to be recognised and supported by those who formulate and implement policy. Unless policy processes harness the knowledge and experience of tutors who work with demanding learners at Level 1 and Level 2, policy is unlikely to meet their needs. The sector needs ways of encouraging dialogue, feedback to policy-makers and a far greater involvement of practitioners in policy formation and evaluation. In the FE sector, we found that most (though not all) of the courses we tracked had strong links with local employers and that staff had a good understanding of the labour markets which their learners would enter.

Although it is too early to assess the full implications of the move to ‘demand-led’ funding, the concerns of interviewees must be considered carefully. It is uncertain how meeting the demands of individuals will be balanced against the demands of employers and the priorities of government. The LSC has a heavy responsibility to try to make the system work, ensuring that valued provision is not lost, particularly for disadvantaged learners.

Several issues about equity in the system were raised repeatedly, usually in the context of the pressure to hit targets for completion of Level 2 qualifications. No-one disputed the need to ensure that learners acquire qualifications and skills, but they did not want the higher achievers to succeed at the expense of more disadvantaged learners who may find that their provision has been sacrificed to make way for more lucrative, target-related courses. While the LSC has been given a role in ‘market-making’, it is not yet clear how this will work. Likewise, there may be time for the threats to rural provision to be averted, ensuring that providers do not offer courses only in highly populated areas. In short, equity within the system should be as high a priority as

efficiency and effectiveness, with the more disadvantaged learners receiving greater resources when necessary.

Since tutors in the sector first drew our attention to their own relatively poor status, salaries and conditions, anxieties have grown. Contestability and the insistence on a ‘demand-led’ system require flexible staffing in colleges, which implies employing a core of fewer permanent staff, supported by flexibly employed colleagues whose help would only be called upon when bids are successful. Those college managers who have been working hard on staff development over the last few years are now at a loss to know what will happen to their staff if they lose business. And if funding subsequently enables them to offer a course again, where they would find teaching staff with the required qualifications both in teaching and in their area of professional expertise (for example, plumbing or childcare), at short notice.

Many of the problems which interviewees described to us arise from centralised, top-down policy which cannot take account of the immense variety of local conditions. There needs to be a new settlement between national, regional and local decision-making, creating a broad national framework, based on social partnership, involving all the main players, but allowing greater local discretion and innovation. Neighbouring colleges and community providers are already collaborating on projects, although they worry about policy which exhorts them to cooperate with providers who were turned into competitors by earlier policy. Fora which brought together staff from different levels in the sector would help to iron out misreadings or mistranslations of policy and allow front-line staff to provide feedback.

The box shows some features of a more equitable and inclusive learning system.

Some features of a more equitable and inclusive system

- A new settlement based on social partnership, where priorities are jointly agreed by government, employers, trade unionists, community services, educationalists and locally elected representatives
- A more devolved balance between national, regional, local and community decision-making
- A more participative model of change, which involves professionals in the formation, evaluation and re-design of policy
- Longer planning cycles to create greater stability and to allow the possibility of risk-taking
- A different model of accountability, based more on trust and peer review
- A system based on shared values and aims, such as equity, as well as efficiency and effectiveness; and a broad curriculum, rather than a concentration solely on “economically valuable skills”
- Capacity-building for the whole sector, based on different models of leadership, initial and in-service training

Further information

Published outputs are available on policy, specific groups of interviewees (e.g. learners, staff) and the three types of learning site.

Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 59(2), 2007, contains seven papers from the team, with commentaries from Mary Hamilton and Phil Hodgkinson.

Further papers include:

Coffield, F. *et al.* (2005) A new learning and skills landscape? The central role of the Learning and Skills Council. *Journal of Education Policy* 20(5), 631-656.

Coffield, F. (2007) *Running ever faster down the wrong road: an alternative future for learning and skills*. Inaugural lecture. London: Institute of Education.

Hodgson, A. *et al.* (2007) Learners in the learning and skills sector: the implications of half-right policy assumptions. *Oxford Review of Education* 33 (3), 315-330.

Coffield, F. *et al.* (forthcoming) How policy impacts on practice and how practice does not impact on policy. *British Educational Research Journal* 33 (5).

Coffield, F. and Edward, S. (forthcoming) Rolling out 'good', 'best' and 'excellent' practice. What next? Perfect practice? *British Educational Research Journal*.

Our website lists additional research reports and conference papers. A book, *Improving learning, skills and inclusion: the impact of policy*, to be published by Routledge and articles for professional journals, are in preparation.

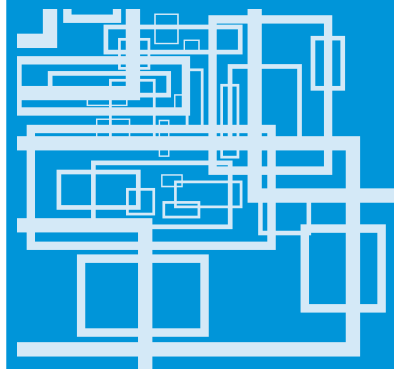
The warrant

Our findings are based on analysis of policy documents, nearly 700 interviews with key players in the sector, and 102 responses from officials and practitioners to a questionnaire in Spring 2007. 131 policy interviews were completed with officials in national departments and agencies and staff of the LSC and other bodies, including employers' organisations, unions and the European Commission in Brussels. Interviewing and observations took place on repeated visits to 24 learning sites (four to each community or workplace site, five to each college site), involving 349 learner participants, and 210 interviews with staff.

Features of our methodology strengthening confidence in our findings include:

- choice of learning sites, equally divided between London and the North East, regions with very different populations and challenges
- repeated visits to learning sites, allowing us to track changes over time
- the range of methods used: interviews, observations, documentary analysis, survey and reflective fora
- iterative data analysis, by type of learning site and by role of interviewees
- reporting findings to participants for discussion at annual project seminars in Newcastle and London and sending them draft reports for comment
- an online survey, which fed back findings to interviewees for corroboration or challenge, and also reached officials and tutors who had not been interviewed
- bringing together participants from different parts of the sector in project seminars, enabling dialogue between people who would not otherwise meet
- a multi-disciplinary team who subjected all published outputs to rigorous internal scrutiny and debate.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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