Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector

How is policy translated into practice?
A framework for analysing policy-practice interactions in the learning and skills sector

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Abstract

This paper outlines the major concepts that have been employed within the TLRP research project ‘The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector’ (LSS). We argue for a conceptual framework that has three main elements: firstly, it is rooted in an analysis of the wider governance context, which recognises the important role played by policy levers in an era of arms-length regulation; secondly, understanding the impact of policy requires a consideration of multiple perspectives at different levels within complex systems; thirdly, this gives rise to the related notions that (i) policy intentions are actively ‘translated’ by actors at different system levels and (ii) that these processes and their effects are ‘mediated’ by a wide range of other factors at the local, institutional and sub-institutional (e.g. faculty, course or classroom) levels. Looking at the relationships between policy and practice in this way highlights the need to take greater account of the role of what we have termed ‘local ecologies’, a concept that helps to conceptualise the interaction of complex sets of factors within a local environment. In conclusion we consider some of the issues raised by our approach to policy analysis.

INTRODUCTION

How can we make sense of contemporary educational policy making? How might we understand the impact that policies have on learners, on teaching staff and on educational institutions? How is policy transformed from a manifesto commitment or a Ministerial statement into changed teaching practices in classrooms and other sites of formal learning? And how do we explain the unintended and occasionally perverse outcomes that can result from well-intentioned policies and initiatives? These were some of the key questions which we had to address during the course of our ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme project ‘The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector’ (LSS). The project ran from January 2004 to July 2007 and its central aim was to examine the impact of policy on teaching, learning and assessment, and also on inclusion, for three groups of learners in the English post-compulsory education and training sector: young people on vocational courses at Levels 1 and 2 in colleges of further education (FE); adults who were improving their basic literacy and numeracy skills in adult community learning (ACL) centres; and employees in work-based learning (WBL) who were engaged in learning to improve their basic skills. We chose to focus on these groups of learners in particular because they are among the more disadvantaged groups served by the immensely diverse sector that is the LSS and, as such, represent key target groups for the policy makers who were charged by David Blunkett in 2000 with realising the vision ‘of a learning society in which everyone has the opportunity to go as far as their talents and efforts will take them’ (DfEE, 2000: 1).

The LSS in England offers a very particular case for an examination of the impact of policy. It covers all post-16 learning and training outside higher education and serving some 6 million learners, is arguably the most diverse sector within the English education and training system -16 to 19 year olds in schools and colleges, young people on

1 The researchers wish to acknowledge the funding of ‘The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector’ by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme – reference number RES 139-25-0105. This paper is derived from the final writing exercise of this TLRP Project and we, therefore, acknowledge the contribution of our other team members - Frank Coffield, Sheila Edward and Ian Finlay. For more detail on the findings of this Project, we refer readers to our book – Coffield, Edward et al. forthcoming.
apprenticeships, work-based learning initiatives, adult basic skills in the community, leisure learning and prison education all fall within the sector. There is no such thing as a typical learner, or even a typical provider, within the LSS. It is also a relatively young sector, having been established by the Learning and Skills Act in 2000. Since the formation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2001, the LSS has benefited from significant increases in investment, making it less true than it once was to describe it as the ‘Cinderella sector’ of education. However, even though funding disparities have narrowed, the sector is largely ignored by the media and, in political terms, its fate is far less important than what happens in schools and universities. A low public profile appears to encourage political experimentation, thus, the LSS has been more susceptible to radical policy changes such as those that have followed in the wake of the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006) – principally the move towards a new system of funding which will see publicly funded, adult vocational skills, apart from community learning and programmes for those with learning difficulties and disabilities, increasingly channelled through ‘demand-led’ routes (DIUS, 2007). It is important to remember too that, seen within the wider European or even just the UK context, the Government stands apart in the extent to which it has applied market mechanisms in the education and training system as a whole in England.

Notwithstanding these significant differences there are also important parallels between the LSS and other areas of education, as well as connections with wider public sector policy. Increased funding for the sector has been accompanied by closer government attention – as witnessed by the Further Education and Training Bill (HMG, 2006) – and a constant stream of major reorganisations, new initiatives and shifting priorities has forced professionals to become adept at coping with constant change (Edward et al., 2007). This is one aspect in which the experience of those working in the LSS is very similar to that of school teachers (Moss, forthcoming). Moreover, many of the recent developments in the LSS closely mirror the UK Government’s priorities for reform across all of the public services (PMSU, 2006, 2007): in short, a move away from reliance on top-down performance management (through the use of targets, performance measures and audit), to a model of reform that is also driven by greater competition, user voice and measures to improve the capability and capacity of public services (see Coffield, Steer, et al., forthcoming, for a critique). For these reasons, the ways in which policy plays out in the LSS may resonate with experiences elsewhere in education and in other parts of the public sector.

A GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: POLICY STEERING IN THE ERA OF ARMS-LENGTH REGULATION

There are many ways of approaching policy analysis, each offering different definitions of ‘policy’ and drawing on different theoretical traditions and/or methodological approaches

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2 It is a moot point how far those working within the LSS identify with the notion of an over-arching sector, particularly given continuing inequalities in both funding levels and the terms and conditions for staff working in different parts of the sector.

3 Funding for the sector stood at £5.5 billion in the LSC’s first full year of operation (2001-02), but has since more than doubled to £11.4 billion for 2007-08.

4 In other words, funding for the majority of adult skills provision that is paid for out of the public purse will follow the choices of employers (through the Train to Gain initiative) and individuals (through the introduction of Skills Accounts).
(Raab, 1994; Taylor et al., 1997). These include rational, organisational, political, symbolic and normative perspectives (Malen and Knapp, 1997). Policy can also be considered as text and as discourse (Ball, 1993), as both a product and as a process (Taylor et al., 1997). Hamilton and Hillier (2006) offer a three-fold typology of approaches to policy analysis:

1. **Rational approaches** adopt a neat, linear view of policy as rational problem-solving, taking at face value the official accounts of policy-makers;

2. **Approaches which take account of complexity** reject the essentially top-down view of policy represented by rational approaches, arguing instead that ‘the beliefs, values and activities of the whole range of actors in the policy-making process are important to its outcome’ (ibid.: 33); and

3. **Critical policy analysis** draws on post-structuralist theorists to analyse the ways in which certain ‘discourses’ are privileged over others, leading to the framing of policy problems in particular ways that shape how people see the world and their possibilities for action within it.

Our approach to analysing policy draws on all three but particularly upon elements of the second and third of these types and is akin to what has been termed by Raab (1994) a ‘governance approach’. We have been particularly influenced by the work of Janet Newman, for whom ‘Governance is an analytical concept, giving rise to questions about what forms of power and authority, patterns of relationships and rights and obligations might typify a particular approach to governing’ (2001: 11). The governance perspective on policy has emerged in response to fundamental changes in the relationships between the state, economy and civil society:

*Governance has become a shorthand term to describe a particular set of changes. It signifies a set of elusive but potentially deeply significant shifts in the way in which government seeks to govern… It denotes the development of ways of coordinating economic activity that transcend the limitations of both hierarchy and markets… It highlights the role of the state in ‘steering’ action within complex social systems… It denotes the reshaping of the role of local government away from service delivery towards ‘community governance’…* (Newman, 2001: 11 – original emphasis)

An important feature of the governance perspective is that it does not take these changes for granted, but seeks to examine the dynamics within them. It is recognised that different political narratives and institutional practices overlap, giving rise to ‘tensions and disjunctures’ (ibid.: 26). In our analysis of the impact of policy in the LSS we have focussed in particular on the role of the state in steering action within complex systems, and it is to this important aspect of governance that we now turn.

**The rise of policy steering**

The term policy steering refers to the processes whereby national governments have withdrawn from direct control over the administration of public services, increasingly using a range of different ‘levers’ to steer policy in a system of arms-length regulation. This
development is associated with the decline of the administrative Keynesian state and the emergence of new forms of governance based upon neo-liberal principles (Newman, 2000; Ainley, 2004). During the 1980s and early 1990s, under successive Conservative governments, public services and the relationship between government and citizens in the UK were transformed by what has been termed the ‘New Public Management’. Primacy was given to economic norms and values in the public services (Christiansen and Lægreid, 2002). Public management was transformed through ‘restructuring of the public sector, particularly through privatisation; restructuring and slimming down central civil services; introducing competition, especially through internal markets and contracting public services to the private sector; [and] improving efficiency, especially through performance auditing and measurement’ (Minogue, 1998: 18). Thus, ‘citizens and clients were recast as consumers, and public service organisations were recast in the image of the business world’ (Newman, 2000: 45).

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 brought a new model of governance associated with the discourse of modernisation (Newman, 2000). In important respects the modernisation agenda continued the New Public Management project of transforming the public sector through the use of market mechanisms and the promotion of a consumer ethos, attacking monopoly forms of provision and increasing accountability to service users and other ‘stakeholders’. There was also continuity in the ‘focus on the containment of welfare expenditure, on organisational efficiency and performance, and on the search for business solutions to social and policy problems’ (ibid.: 46). What makes modernisation distinct from New Public Management is that it is linked to social democratic attempts to construct a ‘third way’ in politics (Giddens, 1998), embracing the neo-liberal values of markets and competition whilst advocating a key role for government in promoting social inclusion. This hybrid regime, fusing social democratic aims with the continued use of neo-liberal mechanisms for achieving change (with the latter comprising the dominant strand of the discourse), is what Hall (2003) terms New Labour’s ‘double shuffle’.

The rise of policy steering can also be seen as a response to the displacement of the old certainties of twentieth century industrial society by a more ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Beck, 1994) in which there is a growing awareness of the limitations of the state’s capacity to solve complex social problems on its own:

_No single agency, public or private, has all the knowledge and information required to solve complex problems in a dynamic and diverse society, and no single actor has the power to control events in a complex and diverse field of actions and interactions. Rather than government acting alone it is increasingly engaging in co-regulation, co-steering, co-production, cooperative management, public/private partnerships and other forms of governing that cross the boundaries between government and society and between the public and private sectors._


As its operational functions have steadily been ‘contracted out’ to various Non-Departmental Public Bodies and public-private partnerships (Ainley, 2004; Steinberg and Johnson, 2004), the role of government has shifted to that of ‘a regulator of services, setter of standards and guarantor of quality’ (Newman, 2001: 83). National policy is, therefore, increasingly channelled through intermediary agencies and is steered at arms-length through the use of a range of levers or ‘governing instruments’ (Kooiman, 2003). These
include performance targets, standards, audit, inspection and quality assurance processes, backed up by powers to intervene where public services are ‘failing’.

Looking at the role and impact of policy levers is not sufficient for understanding policy in the LSS, however. The selection and use of certain levers to steer policy needs to be analysed in the context of the dominant policy drivers and policy narratives. Policy drivers are the overarching policy priorities which set the direction of policy. In the case of the LSS, the twin drivers of policy have consistently been skills and social justice - with the latter seen as dependent upon the development of skills for economic competitiveness (Hodgson et al., 2007a). The choices about whether and how different policy levers are used are bound up with the dominant policy drivers. Decisions about how policy is to be steered are therefore inherently political, although the actual operation of policy levers may be designed to be more or less politicised (Raffe and Spours, 2007).

While policy drivers are about overall policy aims, policy narratives both legitimate the drivers and specify the means by which they will be achieved. These policy narratives therefore provide the tone of policy and may be focussed around major commissions, inquiries or policy documents – recent examples within the LSS would include Tomlinson on 14-19, Foster on the future role of Further Education and Leitch on skills. Policy narratives can also be used to secure ideological consistency in policy making across government departments, for example the promotion by the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit (2006) of a model of public service reform. In Kooiman’s (2003) terms, we need to look not only at governing instrumentation, but also at governing images (e.g. at the way key concepts such as ‘education’, ‘learning’ and ‘skills’ are represented) and then at governing actions (that is, at the operational measures that are put into place in response to policy instruments, e.g. looking at the impact of national standards, curricular developments, teaching materials, tests, etc.).

Policy steering in the LSS

In our study of the LSS we chose to focus in detail on the role played by five policy levers which appeared to us, at the outset of the research, as being the most prominent mechanisms through which policy in the sector was being steered. These were:

Funding – This involved looking not only at the overall levels of funding being allocated to the sector (i.e. the sufficiency of the resources for what providers were being asked to deliver), but also at: the distribution of funding within the LSS; the prioritisation of funding for certain groups of learners and types of provision; the mechanisms through which funding is allocated or earned; funding inequalities, both within the sector and also between the LSS, schools and HE; the balance of contributions to the costs of learning made by the state, employers and individuals; and the connections between funding, planning and targets.

Targets – As in other areas of education and in many other public services, targets have been used as a major steering mechanism within the LSS. While target setting occurs at all levels of the sector, the influence of the Treasury’s Public Service Agreement targets has been particularly pronounced. We looked at whether such high profile targets have been met (the LSS has in fact been highly successful in meeting the targets that government has set for it), but also focussed on the processes of target-setting, the degree
to which targets were owned by the profession or imposed upon it, and the positive and negative effects that targets can have on teaching, learning and inclusion.

Planning – By planning we mean the formal mechanisms through which provision within the LSS is organised, the processes for identifying what provision should be offered and the balance between institutional collaboration and competition. Planning functions exist at the national level, in different spatial areas beneath the national level (e.g. regionally, sub-regionally and within local authority areas), within employment sectors (e.g. through the Sector Skills Councils) and also at the institutional level.

Inspection – In looking at the role played by the inspectorates we focussed both on the impact of inspection and also on the wide range of other quality improvement measures that were introduced into the sector. For example, we looked at the role played by the Standards Unit (through its teaching materials and the training of Subject Learning Coaches), the formation of the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning, quality improvement measures such as the LSC’s (2006) Framework for Excellence, and the promotion of ‘good’, ‘best’ and ‘excellent’ practice (see Coffield and Edward, forthcoming).

Initiatives – We examined some of the major initiatives that have been introduced into the sector, focussing on those most relevant to the three groups of learners we had chosen to study. The main initiatives that impinged on their study were: the Education Maintenance Allowance; Skills for Life, the national strategy for literacy, numeracy and ESOL; the Employer Training Pilots, which subsequently became Train to Gain and the Union Learning Fund which supported Union Learning Representatives and basic skills provision in the workplace.

Although we identified these five policy levers as separate steering mechanisms, it was apparent that each of these levers do not operate in isolation – rather they interact and combine in ways that are sometimes intended by policy and sometimes not. We thus found that particular combinations of policy levers, notably the linking of funding and targets, could exert a powerful influence over institutional behaviour. We also recognised that there were other important levers being used by policy makers, including Continuing Professional Development, the qualifications system and forms of employer regulation. Our research also highlighted the way in which different policy levers, or combinations of levers, have been applied during particular phases of policy. For example, during the 1990s, funding was used as the dominant lever under the auspices of the Further Education Funding Council and the Training and Enterprise Councils; the early years of the LSC (from 2001 to 2004), meanwhile, witnessed the rise of area-based planning (e.g. through each of the 47 local LSCs conducting a Strategic Area Review); and since 2005 there has been a further shift in favour of a top-down market model in which funding, national targets, ‘light touch’ and self-regulation have come to the fore (see Steer et al., 2007, for more detail).

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5 During most of the period of our research inspection in the LSS was divided between two inspectorates, Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which have since merged as part of the enlarged Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills.
POLICY TRANSLATION IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF THE LSS

Stephen Ball (1994) argued that the complexity and scope of policy analysis necessitates working with different conceptualisations of policy, proposing that policy can be analysed as text and also as discourse. Looking at policy as text draws attention to the contested and negotiated manner in which policy documents are initially constructed and crucially highlights the ways in which policies are actively interpreted and reinterpreted by a wide range of actors at different levels of the system and at different points over time:

"Policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics; representations change, key interpreters (secretaries of state, ministers, chairs of councils) change... At all stages of the policy process we are confronted with different interpretations of policy... there may often be key mediators of policy in any setting who are relied upon by others to relate policy to context or to gatekeep, e.g. headteachers (Wallace 1988) or heads of department (Bowe and Ball with Gold 1992). (Ball, 1994: 17 – emphasis added)

This stress on the many interpretations that policy texts go through as pass from policy making circles into local educational contexts underscores the agency of all of those involved in this process: ‘the translation of the crude, abstract simplicities of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involves productive thought, invention and adaptation’ (ibid.: 19). Policy texts may place constraints on teachers and other educational professionals, but the process of translating these texts into actions within a given setting also implies some room for manoeuvre. The idea of policy as discourse, meanwhile, alerts us to ‘the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses’ (ibid.: 21 – original emphasis). Examples include the application of market principles in education, dominant management theories and the culture of performativity – the ‘moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment’ (ibid.: 23).

These two different but complimentary conceptualisations of policy – as text and as discourse – lead Ball to argue for ‘policy trajectory studies’, which ‘employ a cross-sectional rather than a single level analysis by tracing policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state through to the various recipients of policy’ (ibid.: 26). This multi-level, policy trajectory approach influenced our own research design and conceptual thinking. We therefore sought to examine policy and its effects (with specific reference to the five policy levers described in the previous section) at each of the major levels of the learning and skills sector.

As shown in Figure 1, it is possible to identify 10 or 11 major levels of policy within the LSS. During the three and a half years of the research we conducted interviews with key actors at all of the levels, interviewing many of the participants repeatedly over time (thereby tracing policy trajectories across time and through the different system levels). This diagram provides a summary of the cross-section of levels at which we sought to analyse policy in the LSS. What it does not fully convey is the sheer complexity of the organisational arrangements within the sector, which shifted constantly during our study.⁶ If we view this diagram as a (greatly simplified) representation of the chain through which

⁶ See Coffield et al. (2005) and Hodgson et al. (2007a) for more detail on the changing learning and skills landscape.
national policy levers typically must pass, then the amount of policy translation that routinely takes place begins to become apparent. It is possible to think of chains of translations, beginning at the level of the Secretary of State (or higher, say at the level of EU policy) and working their way through all of the policy-making and administrative levels of the sector, before reaching the institutional level and carrying on through different layers of management and eventually reaching teachers and learners. With so much scope for policy translation it is hardly surprising that on occasion policy may be ‘mistranslated’ or even lost in translation.

Figure 1. The levels of the LSS we studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Level</td>
<td>e.g. European Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Level – Central Government</td>
<td>e.g. Cabinet Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Level - Departments</td>
<td>e.g. DIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Level - ‘arms-length’ agencies</td>
<td>e.g. National LSC, QIA, QCA, ALI, Ofsted, SSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Organisations</td>
<td>e.g. Awarding Bodies, Unions, CBI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Level</td>
<td>e.g. Regional LSCs, RDAs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local Level</td>
<td>e.g. LSC Partnership Teams, Local Authorities</td>
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<tr>
<th>FE</th>
<th>ACL</th>
<th>WBL</th>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Institutional Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>College Principals</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Departmental Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Faculties</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Course Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Managers, Leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Classroom Level</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learners</td>
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Key
ACL = Adult & Community Learning
ALI = Adult Learning Inspectorate
CBI = Confederation of British Industry
DIES = Department for Education & Skills
FE = Further Education
LSC = Learning and Skills Council
QCA = Qualifications & Curriculum Authority
QIA = Quality Improvement Agency
RDA = Regional Development Agencies
SSC = Sector Skills Council
ULR = Union Learning Representative
WBL = Work-based Learning

1 LEARNERS 2 ACL 3 ALI 4 WBL 5 FE 6 EDUCATION 7 DfES 8 Regional Level 9 Independent Organisations 10 Local Level 11 LEARNERS
TYPES OF POLICY TRANSLATION AND THE ROLE OF MEDIATING FACTORS

Our research interviews with policy makers, and in particular with managers, tutors and learners in 24 sites of learning in London and the North East of England, highlighted a range different ways in which policy is ‘translated’ by actors within the LSS. Illustrative examples of these can be found in some of our recent published papers on FE, ACL and WBL (Spours et al., 2007b; Hodgson et al., 2007b; and Finlay et al., 2007) and also in our book (Coffield et al., forthcoming). For reasons of space, we shall limit ourselves in this paper to setting out the main types of policy translation that we encountered:

Compliance – The term ‘compliance’ was used by Shain and Gleeson (1999) to describe one variant of professional cultures in Further Education in the post-incorporation marketised culture during the 1990s. Although compliance may arise form a variety of different motivations (e.g. it could stem from a genuine ideological commitment to, and belief in, the new policy direction, or be born out of concerns for job security in this new environment), the key feature of this type or response to policy is that it is likely to lead to the reproduction of policy levers, i.e. policy levers undergo minimal translation and their functions (and dysfunctions) are recreated within the institution. This type of translation can result in the aims of an institution or of individual staff becoming increasingly aligned to policy instruments (e.g. to the achievement of particular government targets) rather than to learners or the locality, continual reorganisation in response to policy changes, and multiple data gathering and bureaucracy.

Strategic compliance – More common than straightforward compliance are forms of strategic compliance, denoting responses to policy that are more strongly influenced by an education professional culture (in Shain and Gleeson’s case FE lecturers). Strategic compliers typically accepted some aspects of the managerialist culture but disagreed with others. Their response is to comply partially with the new requirements, whilst continuing to assert their existing values and professional practices. Thus, according to Shain and Gleeson, ‘Strategic compliers identify much more with their sector than with the college or institution… [and] adopt a strategic view whereby they are able to offer `alternative’ measures within the system, to ensure that quality education is provided to a range of students’ (ibid.: 456 & 458). This type of response to policy was evident in our project and is described in more detail in Spours et al. (2007b).

Ethical gaming – We use the idea of ‘ethical gaming’, which we have borrowed from Dixit (2002), to refer to more deliberate and calculated acts of strategic compliance where middle managers and tutors ‘played the system’ or bent the rules to protect the interests of their most vulnerable learners. Such practices were particularly associated in our study with the management of targets and funding, with staff in some institutions looking for ‘quick hits’ (the so-called ‘low-hanging fruit’) that would enable them to reach their targets in order to subsidise their ‘real’ work with learners who would not be able to achieve qualifications so readily (see Hodgson et al. 2007b). One particular example of ethical gaming was what we have termed ‘shielding’. This refers to practices whereby senior and middle managers sought to absorb some of the negative effects of policy levers (e.g. high levels of bureaucracy and uncertainties caused by funding turbulence) so that the staff beneath them did not have to worry about these pressures and could focus instead on their teaching, meeting learners’ needs and so on (see Edward et al. 2007).

Resistance – Resistance to policy refers to instances in which policy actors disagree so strongly with a policy (or aspects of a policy instrument) that they refuse to translate it into
practice and instead directly contest it. Examples of overt resistance were rare in our study, with those who found themselves at odds with policy more likely to adopt strategic forms of compliance or to engage in game playing. This may be symptomatic of LSS professionals finding themselves ambivalently placed in relation to New Labour’s ‘double shuffle’: most welcomed the increased investment and higher profile for the sector, and subscribed to the social democratic aims that have been espoused for the sector, but they found themselves at odds with the neo-liberal mechanisms that have been advanced for realising these policy aims.

Mediating factors and the concept of local ecologies

The ways in which policy eventually impacts on learning and inclusion is not simply the outcome of the many translations that take place along the policy chain – there are clearly many other important factors at play. Prominent among these are factors such as: learners’ needs and backgrounds; institutional ethos and mission; management cultures within institutions; the strength or otherwise of staff teams or ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991); the quality of the physical learning environment; learning support policies; the role of employers; and relationships with other institutions. Like James and Biesta (2007) we see mediation as an interactive process that gives rise to a range of responses or ‘interventions’.

Most of the mediating factors just mentioned are concentrated at the institutional level or at levels within institutions. However, we argue that understanding the impact of policy within institutions also requires an examination the relationships between institutions and also of the interactions between institutions and features of the wider local environment. The concept of ‘local ecologies’ has been used by Jupp (2005) and Stanton and Fletcher (2006) in relation to institutional patterns of 14-19 education, with the latter referring to ‘provider ecologies in which the actions of one party (e.g. 11-18 schools) affects the health of another (e.g. FE colleges)’. We have suggested expanding the concept to encompass differing configurations of institutional provision (e.g. the extent of institutional competition or collaboration within areas), economic conditions, local and regional labour markets and patterns of employer demand for learning, geography, journey to learn patterns, and learner needs. Thinking in ecological terms is helpful because it draws attention to the interconnectedness of all of these features within any given locale: changes in one dimension are likely to have knock-on effects on others. The ecological metaphor also has the advantage that it can be applied to different scales of organisation – depending upon the context, it may be helpful to analyse policy interactions in relation to a local authority area, a sub-regional area (spanning a number of local authorities) or even to look at a whole region (see Grainger et al. forthcoming).

Colleges and other learning providers in the LSS can be viewed as being engaged in a continuous balancing act, having to respond on the one hand to the distinctive needs of their local ecology, whilst simultaneously having to meet the requirements imposed upon them by policy levers (e.g. through the audit and inspection process, agreeing plans with their local LSC, monitoring for targets, and so on). An important question that arises, then, is: How far do the governance context and the operation of policy levers support or interfere with providers’ ability to respond effectively to the needs of their local ecology? Our research suggests that the current system of governance is often highly disruptive of
provider relationships within their local ecologies, exerting considerable transaction costs in the process (see Spours et al., 2007b).

CONCLUSION: GOVERNANCE, AGENCY AND POLICY SPACES

The conceptual framework that we have outlined here was developed iteratively during the course of the research. As our research questions and emerging findings evolved and took us down new avenues of enquiry, so we looked for theoretical perspectives that might help us to understand different aspects of ‘the impact of policy’ in the LSS (not all of which have been detailed here). We share Stephen Ball’s view that the complexity and scope of policy analysis ‘precludes the possibility of single-theory explanations’ and that ‘What we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories’ (1994: 14). This paper has sought to highlight some of the major conceptual tools that we found helpful in seeking to understand the impact of policy in the LSS, but we do not pretend that this represents a complete set of tools for understanding all aspects of policy making, implementation and outcomes. The metaphor of a toolbox is apt because we ourselves added, and sometimes discarded, various concepts as we went along. By way of conclusion, we shall highlight some strengths of this conceptual framework and consider areas where further development is needed. This takes us into a debate about contemporary governance, professional agency and the policy spaces that exist for practitioners and other policy actors working within the LSS.

One of the key strengths of the conceptual framework outlined here is that it allows, indeed encourages, a focus on policy at all levels of the LSS, from the national and international levels, down to the level of teacher-learner interactions in classrooms and other learning settings. Focussing on the role and impact of individual policy levers and combinations of levers directs attention to their trajectories as they pass along chains of policy actors and are transformed by acts of translation and various mediating factors. This approach does not privilege any particular level or viewpoint – we have looked at policy from the perspectives of learners, their tutors, institutions operating within distinctive local and regional ecologies, and also from the different levels of policy makers in government and the many arms-length agencies that operate within the sector. In considering these multiple viewpoints on policy we were able to gain a more complete understanding than any one group of actors alone could have provided us with. While this multi-level approach represented a form of repeated triangulation that often helped us to establish what was happening with policy levers, the analysis also threw up anomalies, inconsistencies and contradictory accounts. These conflicting narratives about policy levers yielded some of our most important data, for they highlighted areas where policy was leading to unanticipated and unintended outcomes. They also served to highlight key points at which acts of policy translation were taking place.

Our own debates as a research team, as well as comments from others outside the project, have also highlighted some potential difficulties with this conceptual framework. One of these is that our focus on the impact of policy in the LSS opens our work to the criticism of having being been ‘captured’ by the dominant policy discourse (Trowler, 2001). We have taken as our starting point a political construct (‘the Learning and Skills Sector’) and posed questions about the effectiveness of the levers used to steer policy in this sector – which could be seen as amounting to a very top-down, policy-centric view. While we think our perspective, based on hundreds of interviews, reflects a perceived reality in
the LSS, our theoretical approach also attempts to appreciate the processes of interpretation and contestation.

A specific question, which has been raised by Mary Hamilton (2007), concerns the place of agency (and, by extension, power relationships) in an analysis that takes governance and policy steering mechanisms as its starting point:

The questions I was left with at the end of these papers are all about different aspects of agency in the process of policy and change: Who is active in these sectors and who is not? What are the different stakeholders doing and how are they manoeuvring to get their perspective taken account of? In what ways are they accountable to others? What are the possibilities for exerting positive agency, initiating and shaping, rather than re-active response or ‘gaming’? (Hamilton, 2007: 253 – original emphasis).

These are questions about the nature of the policy spaces within which policy actors operate (see also Hodgson and Spours, 2006), as well as about distributions of power within these spaces. Hamilton goes on to comment that ‘the project... could drill down more explicitly to this level... For example, they might identify where the deliberative spaces in the current policy developments have been – who has been talking to whom? Who wasn’t even round the table? Has it always been like this, and are there other kinds of policy regimes that feel less ‘top-down’, more open to the acknowledgement of diversity?’ (Hamilton, 2007: 256). We have since done work on the governance conditions that would be required for more open, participative and deliberative policy spaces (Coffield, Edward et al., forthcoming, Chapter 8), but acknowledge that there remains scope for a more detailed exploration of the nature of policy spaces (and power relationships within them) in the LSS.

However, such questions about agency and power also bring us back to fundamental issues of governance which we took as our conceptual starting point. Consistent with the analysis of Newman and others, the evidence from our research underscored the importance of ‘the proliferation of control measures designed to ensure that ‘agents’ (organisations in the dispersed field of service delivery networks) delivered what the ‘principal’ (government) intended’ (Newman, 2001: 86 – emphasis added). For example in the survey of individuals working in the LSS we undertook towards the end of our research project, 93 percent of respondents agreed that providers are constrained by national targets which are handed down by the LSC with little room for local negotiation (Steer and Lakey 2007). Lack of room for manoeuvre was not just a complaint made by practitioners, for many of the policy makers we interviewed also bemoaned the constraining effects of political interference and micro-management upon their work (Hodgson et al. 2007a). Without wishing to overstate the case, these were strong features of how we found New Labour’s modernisation agenda being enacted and experienced by those working with the LSS at the time of the research. In short, questions about agency and the nature of policy spaces are also questions of governance. The early months of Gordon Brown’s Premiership suggest that a new approach to governing public services may be emerging and it will be interesting to see whether this results in a significant shift in

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7 This is a reference to the collection of six articles from the project that appeared in a special issue of the Journal of Vocational Education and Training (June 2007, Volume 59, Number 2).
8 There were 86 responses to this question, made up largely of LSS practitioners.
the balance between top-down policy steering and more local, bottom-up participation in policy spaces in the LSS and elsewhere.

REFERENCES


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