

Now you see it, now you don't. The ebb and flow of basic skills in government policy and VET practice



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In the 21st Century, our natural resource is our people - and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous - higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice' (Leitch, 2006: 1)

Innovation is key to unlocking talent and exploiting knowledge (Innovation Nation, DIUS, 2008)

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Almost every country in the OECD is undertaking a review programme at the moment to try and understand how to ensure that their education and training system keeps pace with the rate of industry change in order to ensure their competitiveness (Chris Humphries, Chief Executive of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, in Besley, 2008).

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A now familiar pattern for government reports; painfully detailed description of the issue; a plausible, though contested, interpretation of the facts and a set of proposals for reform that lack any rigorous justification or link to the preceding analysis (Fletcher, 2007: 8).

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The education and training system in England is notoriously fragmented and, being an "extended" policy community, is subject to the competing demands of multiple interest groups' (Richardson *et al*, 1993: 13)

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A major weakness in the policy-making structure - the absence of co-ordination of education, training and labour market policy either within or between departments. Britain stands alone among the main European nations for its failure to establish a well-financed, independent organisation that is able to develop and evaluate policy in this rapidly changing field (Finegold, 1993:52)

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Too little investment by employers in their employees, too little responsibility taken by individuals for their own learning, a qualification system divorced from the needs of the modern workplace, a welfare system not meeting the needs of people in a fast-changing economy (Leitch, 2006: para 21)

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[a lack of] explicit debate about, and clarity upon, the respective rights, responsibilities and roles (the three "Rs") of the different actors in the VET system (Gleeson and Keep, 2004: 47-48)

Many of the changes in the English system of VET that have taken place over the last 20 years have been a form of displacement activity that skirts around the central problem that employers have not acted as hoped and intended at least in part, expansion of the education system has been a substitute for action by employers, as instanced by the growth of FE and HE (Keep, 2004: 57)

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The challenge here is not just about ensuring that the nature and extent of the HE offer meets the needs of employers but involves motivating employers and individual employees to see value and engage in higher level skills development. Because of this issue we do not, as yet, know enough about the demand from employers and the ability of HEIs to meet that demand (HEA, 2006: 7)

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Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, off-set against other expectations. All of this involves creative social action, not robotic reactivity (Ball, 1993:12)

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[people' engagement with policy is] fuelled and expressed in their passions and feelings about certain situations. They harbour sympathies and antipathies toward the people that make up their world. They are strongly committed to some subjects and indifferent and apathetic towards others...As a consequence, policy issues are, almost by definition, contested. Moreover, resources of money and power are differentially distributed among the actors involved (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003:21)

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But what counts in the end is, given the multitude of constraints that characterise most policy situations, usually not the definitive resolution of a conflict, but the discovery of a workable definition of the problem, or the temporary stabilisation of a situation that is unhinged or threatens to become so, or the emergence of personal insight that allows the actor to function more effectively in the situation at hand

(Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003:23)

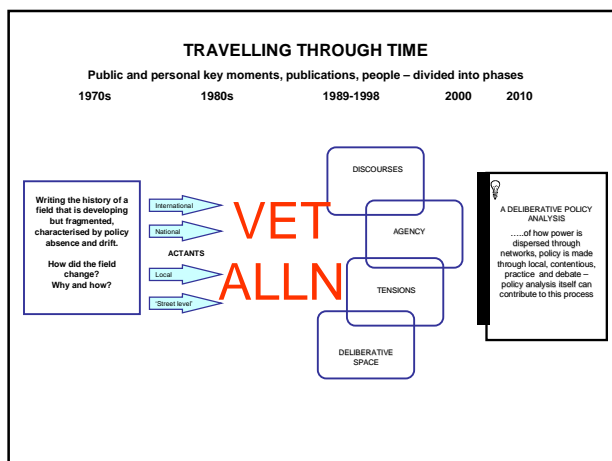
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We see practitioners of very different plumage wrestle with conflict, power, uncertainty and unpredictability. Solutions are not so much formulated as arrived at, haltingly, tentatively, through acting upon the situation at hand and through the application of practical wisdom in negotiating concrete situations...consequently, the role of policy analysis changes too. It is not longer about the invention of solutions for society; it often finds itself in the 'mud' of policy practice, trying to assist in the discovery of new policy options and the formulation of compelling arguments....Traditional policy science focuses on 'problems' and 'decisions'. We suggest that a reformulated, deliberative policy science takes practices as its unit of analysis.

(Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003: 18)

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Relatively few governments have coherent, long-term national literacy policies encompassing attention to governance, programme design and delivery, human and financial resources and the promotion of an environment in which individuals are encouraged to become literate and to sustain their skills. (UNESCO, 2006:24)



Phase One: Mid 1970s:

Literacy Campaign led by a coalition of voluntary agencies with a powerful media partner, the BBC

Phase Two: 1980s

Provision developed substantially, supported by Local Education Authority Adult Education Services and voluntary organizations, with leadership, training and development funding from a national agency (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Agency, ALBSU, later the Basic Skills Agency, BSA) The MSC and the EU were important sources of funding

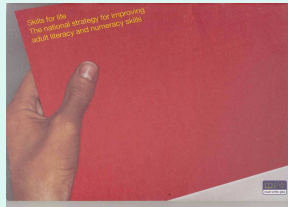
Phase Three: 1989 – 1998

Depletion of LEA funding and control, basic skills given statutory status through a more formalized further education (FE) system, dependent on funding through a national funding body, the FEFC.



Phase Four: 1998- present

Development of Skills for Life policy: New government strategy unit created, £1.5 billion of government money is committed.



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There's trends when I look back at it. There was all this individualised learning and then there was group learning and then there was open learning in basic skills, then there was family learning and now there's work placed learning. That seems to be the latest bit of the evolution I feel, new students, new ways of working (RP, Manchester).



Different Discourses of Adult Basic Skills

- Primary
- Remedial
- Special
- English as a Foreign Language
- Liberal Adult Education
- Vocational Further Education
- Radical Adult and Popular Education

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Agency and activism

When you ask "who made the policy?" *We made the policy'* (JB, ESOL pioneer in Leics)

And every year as part of getting our funding there would be an interview with a certain group of councillors..... and either all or one of the workers would go to this, argue our case and describe what we'd been doing and what we planned to do and we always got the money it has to be said. (SF, Manchester)

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Enduring tensions in adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN)

- Professionalisation versus voluntarism
- Nomenclature of the field and its participants: the tension around discourse but also the deeper ideological debates
- Different groupings in the field of adult continuing education: eg literacy, numeracy and ESOL; private trainers v college v community-based tutors; voluntary v statutory.
- Marketisation v collaboration
- Rights v obligations
- Boundary issues about what counts as ALLN. These are currently especially sharp around ICT and around notions of "key skills" and "basic skills".
- embedded versus stand alone provision for ALLN

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Deliberative spaces

The big 1970's literacy thing, by the early 80's had become unfashionable, lots of people who had started there had moved away and moved onto other things, other issues became more important and it just lost its fashion, it was almost a fashion thing. And one of the things I suppose for us is that we stuck with it even though it was unfashionable (Alan Wells, Director, Basic Skills Agency)

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Past initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy skills have produced limited progress and sometimes bred a culture of inertia and fatalism about the ability to make big improvements in this area... We must be bold and imaginative to overcome them (Skills for Life, 2001, Introduction).

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Until Skills for Life there was no co-ordinated policy for the field except where basic skills formed part of another policy agenda.

Importance of the role and vision of a national agency to influence the field

Importance of professional expertise as a resource; street level activism can make a difference

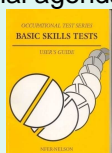
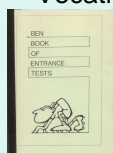
Tensions are inevitable – e.g. diversity and standardisation

Deliberative spaces are hard to open up across policy, practice and research

Potential roles of research in examining the absences and gaps as well as the existence of action

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Vocational agenda for basic skills



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The new regime in ALLN



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- Huge funding shift since 1991
- Creation of national strategy 2001
- Changing position of ALLN within compulsory schooling and workplace
- Drive to improve basic levels within the working population
- Changing nature of what counts – ie functional skills for economic success takes precedence
- Dispersal of responsibility from one government department across a number of departments
- Use of statistics to claim success yet little public appreciation of the nature of the figures
- Continued policy drive and likely to become more acute with current economic climate
- Push and pull of government intervention through funding constraints.
- Employer engagement now compromised unless Train to Gain funds rescue previous training levels
- The best of times and the worst of times

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A problem for policymaking

The Moser Committee does fit in with the whole government, commander control approach. The idea that people who are neither professionals, nor clients can really conceptualise and create the right conditions is arrogant in the extreme. We had and we still have the opportunity to really revolutionise teaching and learning in ESOL and literacy but unless we engage teachers and students we can't for a minute unleash the potential (member of Moser Committee).

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The solution: research in VET

- Define and clarify phenomena, issues and problems
- Make use of information and create evidence based policymaking
 - Local
 - National
 - International

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Research, policy and practice

- Role of practitioner
 - Make explicit tacit knowledge and implicit assumptions
 - Test out new ideas and hypotheses
- Role of manager
 - Make explicit tacit knowledge and implicit assumptions
 - Create resources to test out ideas, evaluate implementation, inform local and national practices
- Role of funders, policy makers
 - Make explicit tacit knowledge and implicit assumptions
 - Manage limited resources
 - Listen to practitioners and their managers
 - Evaluate and identify the signals within the policy noise

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There is a professionalisation going on which is good in a way ... so the *Skills for Life Strategy* and the policies that are coming out from that are interesting and welcomed. Sometimes I think they're throwing money; it's too short term or it's all got to be spent. 'Here's a huge amount of money, spend it by such and such a time' and it's quantity not quality. I still feel there's this constant huge tension. Everything is funding led and defined in terms of funding and it destroys, it sucks the life out of the work that we do. And I am amazed by myself as well as other people that we continue to maintain an enthusiasm and quality experience. And I mean quality in the true sense of the word, not in the way it's bandied about in terms of quality standards (ALLN organiser).

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The *Skills for Life Strategy* has galvanised new energy and ideas and has been a serious attempt to embed ALLN within a state-funded system of learning opportunities. We predict that this temporary stabilisation of ALLN will move on. But whatever the official shape and name of the field in the future, activists will continue to advocate for it through ingenious everyday tactics. ALLN will continue to be entwined in the push and pull of surrounding social policy, with all the tensions and contradictions that this implies. Most importantly, the field will continue to change as new communication technologies, social and political events re-shape the everyday practices of language, literacy and numeracy (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006:159).

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