

Research Briefing N° 24

Policy, Learning and Inclusion in the Learning and Skills Sector (2004-2007)

This research evaluated the impact of policy levers on key stakeholders in the learning and skills sector and identified the main features of more equitable and inclusive local learning systems.

Key words: learning and skills;
inclusion; policy; learning

Key findings



- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

What we did

Against a background of considerable policy activity in the learning and skills sector (LSS), the study 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 particular, it evaluated the impact of five policy levers: targets, funding, planning, inspection, and policy initiatives such as Skills for Life, on learning and inclusion in the LSS, and identify the main features of more equitable and inclusive local learning systems.

The project was carried out between 2004 and 2007 and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the Teaching and Learning Programme.

Further information

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

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Coffield, F., Edward, S., Finlay, I., Hodgson, A., Spours, K. and Steer, R. (2008). Improving Learning, Skills and Inclusion: the impact of policy on post-compulsory education. London: Routledge

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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.

Hodgson, A., Spours, K. and Steer, R. (2008). All change for the learning and skills sector? *Journal of Education and Work* 21 (2) 115-131.

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

How we did it

Interviewing and observations (involving 349 learners and 210 members of staff) took place on repeated visits to 24 learning sites in two very different regions, London and North East England: 8 in FE, 8 adult courses in the community, and 8 workplace learning sites.

Alongside this fieldwork at the institutional level, the project undertook analysis of policy documents; 700 interviews with key players in the sector; 102 responses from officials and practitioners to a questionnaire in Spring 2004; a survey; and 131 interviews with officials in national departments and agencies, staff of the then Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and other bodies, including employers' organisations, unions and the European Commission in Brussels.

Findings were also reported to participants as well as officials and tutors who had not been interviewed for discussion at annual project seminars and fed back to interviewees by an online survey for corroboration or challenge.

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