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‘The heart of what we do’: policies on teaching, learning and assessment in the learning and skills sector

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One of the stated aims of government policy in England is to put teaching, training and learning at the heart of the learning and skills system. This paper provides a critical review of policies on teaching, learning and assessment in the learning and skills sector over the past five years. It draws upon data collected and analysed in the early stages of an ESRC-funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme project.¹ Using evidence from policy sources, we argue that despite policy rhetoric about devolution of responsibility to the ‘front line’, the dominant ‘images’ that government has of putting teaching, learning and assessment at the heart of the learning and skills sector involves a narrow concept of learning and skills; an idealization of learner agency lacking an appreciation of the pivotal role of the learner–tutor relationship and a top-down view of change in which central government agencies are relied on to secure education standards.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore government assumptions of, and actions toward, teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) in the learning and skills sector (LSS) in England through an analysis of major policy and grant documents. The LSS in England comprises all post-16 education and training except that designated higher education. One may criticize the direction, quantity or speed of government policy on postcompulsory education and training, but it would be difficult to doubt the commitment of the current government to the sector. It will be argued that

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government actions result in a highly centralized and micromanaged LSS within a context of increasing rhetoric about, and organizational changes toward, more devolved governance. It appears that this government is still ambivalent about the extent to which providers can be trusted to meet the needs of learners, although the recent challenge to the sector to come up with its own ideas about self-regulation by Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State, in his speech at the Association of Colleges Annual Conference in Birmingham in November 2006, may possibly mark a change in direction.

The project on which this paper is based is seeking to evaluate the impact of key national policy levers, such as funding, targets and inspection, on TLA (e.g. the provision of learning opportunities, learner outcomes and motivation in the new LSS). It is described in more detail in the introduction to the series of papers in this issue of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.

Approaches to policy

Since 2000, there has been a steady stream of policy texts emanating from the relevant departments that have served to define the LSS and the government's priorities for the sector. Examples of such documents are the Learning and Skills Council remit letter (DfEE, 2000a), *Skills for All* (DfEE, 2000b) *Success for All* (DfES, 2002a) and *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES, 2006a).

'Policy' is a loose term. Here it is used to cover value commitments, strategic objectives and operational instruments and structures at national, regional, local and institutional levels. The matrix in Table 1 illustrates an approach to policy that relates two different dimensions. The horizontal dimension reflects what we have termed conceptual levels of policy. The vertical dimension identifies structural levels of policy. An example of a specific policy is given in each of the cells.

Table 1 illustrates two dimensions along which policy can be described. One links value commitments, strategic objectives and operational practices, and shows how these have developed over time. The second also identifies links between policies being enacted at different levels in the system, and highlights possible differences between intentions and outcomes at each of the levels. In this paper we explore issues relating to the top two rows of the table. These are the rows that illustrate policy at the ministerial/departmental and national levels.

In addition to looking at the three horizontal dimensions at this level, an attempt will be made to relate recent policy history on the LSS in England to the three elements of Kooiman's (2003) social-interactionist approach to policy analysis. The relationships between his concepts of *governing images*, *governing instrumentation*, and *governing actions* in terms of policies impacting on TLA in the English LSS will be discussed. In this paper we interrogate a range of policy documents relevant to the LSS, in order to identify the governing images or value commitments, governing instrumentation or strategies, and governing actions or operations promoted by these documents.

Table 1. Policy matrix

Conceptual/Structural	Value commitments	Strategic objectives	Operational instruments and structures
Ministerial/departmental	Central government commitment to economic prosperity, social justice, community development and individual fulfilment.	The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) focus on driving up standards.	The setting up of the Standards Unit to promote 'best practice'.
National (e.g. Learning and Skills Council [LSC], Adult Learning Inspectorate [ALI])	Recognition by an inspectorate of the importance of a mixed learning economy to cultural well-being.	The use of comparisons across different sectors as an inspectorate strategy to promote improvement.	The two inspectorates designing the Common Inspection Framework.
Regional (e.g. Regional Development Agency (RDA) Regional Skills Partnership)	Recognition at the regional level of the importance of the availability of a skilled workforce for economic development.	An initial focus on performance at Key Stage 3 as a regional strategy.	The use at the regional level of a range of committees to coordinate provision.
Local/subregional (e.g. Local Learning and Skills Council [LLSC], Local Education Authority [LEA])	An LLSC mission to provide opportunities to help people to develop their potential.	An LLSC strategy of delivery through distributed learning.	The setting up of a range of nontraditional venues for the delivery of basic skills provision by an LLSC.
Institutional (e.g. Further Education [FE] College, Adult Learning Centre)	A college mission to develop people through learning so that they can benefit, themselves, society and the economy A tutor's belief in the importance of employment related education.	A college priority to concentrate on the basic skills needs of young people. Integration of basic skills into vocational learning.	A college developing a particular structure of core and support teams to develop basic skills provision. Worksheets that use examples from relevant work practice to develop concepts of area and volume.
Learning setting (e.g. college classroom, workplace learning centre)			

Teaching and learning in government policy in the LSS 2001–2006

The ideological level: images of learning reform

According to Kooiman, ‘Governing is inconceivable without the formation of images. Anyone involved in governing ... forms images about what he or she is governing’ (2003, p. 29). Kooiman discusses how images are formed; that they can be highly sophisticated and based either on a keen understanding of the system being governed or on impressions or even prejudices. These images can be explicit, or they may need to be inferred from instruments or actions. The descriptions of government policies below allow us to make some claims about the images of learning and underpinning values held by the government as they attempt to reform the LSS.

David Blunkett, the former Secretary of State for Education and Employment, set out the government’s values on learning in the LSC’s first remit letter (DfEE, 2000a):

Learning has a major contribution to play in sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, and underpins the Government’s objectives for the renewal of deprived neighbourhoods. Learning encourages people to develop as active citizens and to play a full part in their local community. It strengthens families, builds stronger neighbourhoods, helps older people stay healthy and active, and encourages independence for all by opening up new opportunities—including the chance to explore art, music and literature. And what was available only to the few can, in this new millennium, be enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many. (para. 5)

There are a number of discursive aspects of this extract that are worth teasing out in detail. Firstly, the extract emphasizes the civic, social, economic and individual benefits that are claimed for learning. It makes the assumption that learning always has positive social and individual outcomes, but this is an assumption that cannot be sustained in all circumstances. For example, learning can also discourage people from developing ‘as active citizens’ and can weaken families and neighbourhoods if, for example, it takes place in a deviant, gang culture, or if graduates move away from the localities where they were born to find jobs. The social effects of learning depend on what is learned and in what circumstances the learning takes place. It is not recognized sufficiently that learning can also increase inequalities in society.

Learning can be defined as a significant increase in understanding or capability (adapted from Burgess, 2002, p. 82). Learning, defined in this way, takes place in all social settings. Education is a purposive activity designed to promote learning that the group organizing it deems to be worthwhile, although they may recognize that the actual learning outcomes do not always coincide with those aimed at. The minimal use of the term ‘education’ in recent documents referring to the postcompulsory stage seems to be a deliberate government tactic. In our earlier work (Coffield *et al.*, 2005; Hodgson *et al.*, 2005; Steer *et al.*, 2007) we identified a number of key policy levers (e.g. planning, funding, inspection, targets, and initiatives) used by the government in their efforts to bring about their intentions. These may be represented as ‘on-stage’ or ‘front-of-house’ mechanisms (Trowler, 1998). There are also ways in which behind or ‘below-the-stage’ mechanisms of influencing the system may be represented. Humes (2005) coined the phrase ‘narrative privilege’ to describe the ability of

power elites to set the discursive agenda. Trowler (2001), drawing on Bowe *et al.* (1994), used the term 'discursive capture'. Both Trowler and Humes have in mind the ability of those in power to use language as an instrument of power, e.g. 'education' as a term has been almost completely excluded from documents on postcompulsory education and training and the phrase 'learning and skills sector' substituted.² To some extent we have colluded in this (or have been captured by the discourse) by using the concept of the learning and skills sector in the title of our project. Terms such as 'vocational education and training' or 'postcompulsory education and training' have greater international currency and are still well understood in England.

What messages or power relationships might be implied by the replacement of the term education by learning and skills? One message, for which there exists some evidence, is that the term 'learning and skills' implies a focus on the recipients rather than on the providers of the service, unlike the term education. Learning is conceived of in government texts as an individual activity, whereas education is a collective activity that is the responsibility of national government. This interpretation is supported by statements contained in government documents, e.g. 'putting learners at the heart of the system' implies a clear focus on the recipients of the service. In focusing on learning rather than education, New Labour is continuing the modernization project started by the Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997, which deliberately sought to remove power and influence from education professionals and concentrate it in the hands of central government (see e.g. Newman, 2001).

A second interpretation for the changing language is the view in England, developed from the late 1970s, that the education system is part of the problem of economic performance. Thus rebranding the postcompulsory education system as a learning and skills sector could be seen as disassociating the government from a compromised term and passing the responsibility for learning to the individual and away from the government.

A third possible explanation of the changing discourse is to see it as a manifestation of a progressive movement in education with a focus on learning in contexts not normally associated with education (e.g. the workplace) and on student-centredness. The phrase putting 'teaching, training and learning at the heart of the system' could also be associated with such progressive concerns. One commentator on an earlier version of this paper expressed it as follows: 'part of the intention in choosing an emotive term like *heart* was exactly to put back into the system concern for hearts as well as minds, for the emotive and the affective aspects of learning to be taken into account, to move away from a purely functional view of learning which was alienating both teachers and learners'. A different commentator with a government-insider perspective argued that 'the adoption of "learner" and "focus on the individual learner" ... was by no means an attempt to denigrate education or the social nature of learning. Rather, it was intended to redress the false hierarchies implicit in so much educational terminology, which had ill effects on the often disadvantaged people to whom policy was intended to bring parity of esteem'. In terms discussed earlier, these are 'front-of-house' or 'on-stage' representations of the discourse.

Although the earlier extract from Blunkett embraces a wide view of the purposes of education, this holistic perspective is not carried through into the operational aspects of policy which focus primarily on economic objectives. The majority of initiatives and funding appear to be aimed at developing programmes with explicit outcomes for the economy. In his introduction to *Opportunity for All: Skills for the New Economy* (DfEE, 2000c) Blunkett is explicit about the economic benefits of learning:

... skills and learning must become the key determinants of the economic prosperity and social cohesion of our country. Knowledge and skills are now the key drivers of innovation and change. Economic performance depends increasingly on talent and creativity. And in this new economy, it is education and skills which shape the opportunities and rewards available to individuals. (p. 3)

This simplified version of human capital theory cannot be sustained. For an individual there is strong evidence that better qualifications and levels of skills lead to higher returns in the job market; but this has not been demonstrated with qualifications at Level 1 which, unless used as a stepping stone to higher qualifications, may even serve to stigmatize learners. It is not possible to assert that, in every case, economies will improve their performance just by a general rise in levels of 'talent and creativity'. Economic performance depends on a wide range of both demand and supply factors; e.g. on the supply side, a talented labour force could be hampered by poor capital investment, resulting in lower levels of productivity than they would achieve with better equipment. Interest rates, exchange rates, levels of savings, and the terms of trade all affect economic performance, yet are not causally dependent on knowledge and skills in the naïve terms asserted above (Wolf, 2002).

The aims of government with respect to learning have been outlined above without any reference to how learning might be conceived of by policy-makers. A statement in DfES (2003) gives us one insight into this.

For too many people, learning is something that stops when they leave school. Learning new skills, at work and for pleasure, must become a rewarding part of everyday life. (p. 10)

There is an implicit acceptance of the acquisition model of learning³ in this statement. The assumption is being made that learning takes place only when there is intention on the part of the learner to 'learn new skills', and that this learning requires engagement with teachers and training providers. There needs to be transmission of knowledge or skills to the learner. In short, there is no recognition of either the constructivist (e.g. Kerka, 1997) or situated learning models (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991) that suggest that people cannot fail to be learning and that learning is quintessentially social. Those who support such models of learning would suggest that it is an integral part of living and occurs as people participate in the daily round of work, leisure and other activities. One of the difficulties with the latter models of learning for policy-makers is that they place such forms of learning outside the direct control of policy and outside institutional forms of education.

At the centre, then, of the government's image of learning is the concept that the main purpose of learning is the development of economically useful skills and that learning involves the formal acquisition of these skills. We turn now to the strategic

level and the policy instruments and actions selected by government to act on the LSS.

The strategic level: governing instruments

A useful way to track the government strategy and the instruments on TLA for the learning and skills sector since 2000 is through the LSC's remit letter (DfEE, 2000a) and the annual grant letters (DfEE, 2000d; DfES, 2001, 2002b, 2003, 2004a, 2005, 2006b).

Originally Blunkett (DfEE, 2000a) in the remit letter of over 20 pages identified an overarching aim and 'four wider objectives' for the LSC. The overarching aim was that 'The council must include at its heart strategies and plans to achieve the post-16 National Learning Targets, and ensure that the learning which it funds enhances equality of opportunity' (para. 38). The four wider objectives were:

1. Encouraging young people to stay on in learning;
2. Increasing demand for learning by adults;
3. Maximizing the contribution of education and training to economic performance; and
4. Raising standards.

These are the strategic objectives of government for the LSS, which are to be met by a number of specific measures, e.g. collaboration between the LSC and Connexions (the employment and training advisory service for young people); the effective use of Education Maintenance Allowances; and the opportunity for young people to:

- 'choose education and training that will meet their needs' and take them to at least a Level 2 qualification;
- the creation of 'clear and stimulating pathways';
- 'developing links between secondary and post-16 provision'; and
- encouraging young people to 'experience the world of work' (DfEE, 2000a, paras. 40–45)

Ways of increasing demand for learning by adults were listed as the provision of 'high quality information advice and guidance'; 'a continuing drive to improve the flexibility and attractiveness of learning opportunities'; 'the development of on-line learning opportunities'; arrangements to tackle poor basic skills, including the embedding of 'literacy and numeracy support'; and collaboration with the Employment Service (paras. 46–54).

The third objective above has less relevance to this paper on TLA, but two of the strategies for achieving it are germane. These are raising the profile of learning in the workplace and the role of the post-16 National Learning Targets in raising the general skill level of the workforce (paras. 58, 60).

A variety of strategies were also put forward aimed at raising standards. These included developing a close working relationship between the LSC and the inspectorates; addressing 'unhealthy competition' between providers; 'improving

the take-up of professional teaching and training qualifications'; and working 'with providers to improve their capacity to deliver lifelong learning... objectives' (paras. 62–69).

The annual grant letters show how the emphases in policy have shifted over the years from 2000 to 2006. Table 2 provides an example of the way priorities have changed during this period. Policy is tracked across the seven grant letters published so far. This proved to be a straightforward task for the first three letters; but, as the original objectives of the remit letter became superseded by new objectives contained in *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001), *Success for All* (DfES, 2002a), *21st Century Skills* (DfES *et al.*, 2003), and *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004b), it became more difficult. What these additional policy documents did was to flesh out policies that had previously been sketchy. Policy in the LSS from Blunkett's term as Secretary of State through to the third year of Clarke's term became more detailed, more complex, but also more centrally controlled.

Table 2 illustrates the developing priorities with respect to the participation of young people. One point that is immediately apparent from this table is the increase in the number of instructions given to the LSC between the first grant letter of Blunkett and the letters of Morris and Clarke (to make the table more user-friendly, in some cases two points in the letters have been collapsed into one; so the increase is even more acute than is illustrated). By contrast, Johnson's letter sets far fewer objectives. There is a very clear change in tone between the early grant letters of Blunkett and Morris and the later letters of Clarke. The former are business-like and professional, as though addressing a respected agent. Clarke's letters are much more authoritarian and hectoring in tone. Blunkett, for example, wrote, 'Your key achievement areas ... are:' (DfEE, 2000d). This was followed by a list of priorities. Clarke's third letter is full of statements like 'The Council must ...', and 'I look to [the Council] to drive forward ...'. Motoring metaphors are frequent, such as 'drive forward', 'driving up', 'step up a gear', 'keep up momentum', and 'an acceleration of improvement' (DfES, 2004a). The letters of Kelly and Johnson (DfES, 2005, 2006b) revert to the more measured tones of earlier letters, but retain the assumption of a need for a step-change. One possible reason for the tone of the Clarke grant letters was the anxiety that the 'early LSC model' in the period up to 2003 (Hodgson *et al.*, 2005) was not delivering the change that government expected of the LSC. As well as the perennial need for politicians to show immediate results, the grant letters may have reflected a desire for the LSC to embrace what ministers saw as a more responsive 'business cycle model' (Steer *et al.*, 2007). The 'Agenda for Change' reforms under Mark Haysom appear to have succeeded in calming ministerial nerves, and this may have been reflected in the character of the more recent grant letters from Kelly and Johnson.

Over and above the issue of tone, there were several significant shifts in policy over the seven grant letters. While encouraging young people to participate in education remained a constant theme, the measures to achieve this altered. The Blunkett letter still envisaged a 16–19 stage. Morris wrote of both 16–19 and 14–19. By the time of Clarke, the discourse had completely moved to 14–19. Kelly's letter recognized the proposals in the *Agenda for Change* (LSC, 2005) and anticipated the changes that

Table 2. Changing priorities: encouraging young people to stay on in learning

2001–02 Blunkett	2002–03 Morris	2003–04 Clarke	2004–05 Clarke	2005–06 Clarke	2006–07 Kelly	2007–08 Johnson
<p>1. To secure a new entitlement for 16- to 19-year-olds.</p> <p>2. To maximize participation by encouraging all young people to stay in learning.</p> <p>3. To raise levels of attainment by young people in FE and Modern Apprenticeship.</p>	<p>1. To increase the proportion of 19-year-olds achieving Level 2 and 3 qualifications.</p> <p>2. To tackle the basic skill needs of those aged 16–19.</p> <p>3. To work to ensure that young people are on appropriate and relevant learning opportunities.</p> <p>4. To support the development of a more coherent and well-balanced 14–19 phase of learning, and 'increased flexibility for 14- to 16-year-olds'.</p> <p>5. To raise the status of vocational learning.</p> <p>6. To encourage the take-up of Curriculum 2000.</p> <p>7. To develop high quality education for young people in sixth-form and FE colleges.</p>	<p>1. To ensure the sector develops a more coherent phase of learning for 14- to 19-year-olds.</p> <p>2. By 2010, 90% of young people by age 22 will be fit for entry into HE or skilled employment.</p> <p>3. By 2004, increase... the no. of 19-year-olds achieving a qualification equivalent to National Vocational Qualification Level 2, and 55% to have a Level 3 qualification.</p> <p>4. Improve the literacy and numeracy skills of young people.</p> <p>5. Promote participation of young people—Entry to Employment (E2E), EMAs, Connexions Card, MIAs</p>	<p>1. Further developing the capacity of the learning and skills sector to deliver a more learner-centred offering for the 14–19 age group.</p> <p>2. Continuing to support the Increased Flexibility Programme for 14–16s and the 14–19 Pathfinder programme.</p> <p>3. Playing an active role in supporting disadvantaged learners, by helping to embed E2E, and maximizing the take-up of financial support, including EMAs.</p> <p>4. Listening to and supporting the needs of learners.</p>	<p>1. The Council must continue to drive up participation and attainment amongst young people and adults.</p> <p>2. All young people to reach age 19 ready for skilled employment or HE.</p> <p>3. Encourage more young people from all backgrounds to gain the qualifications and aspiration for HE.</p> <p>4. The 5-year strategy will place new and challenging demands on colleges, who will need to collaborate with other providers to deliver a more personalized learning offer for young people and increase their flexibility and responsiveness to individual and employer needs.</p>	<p>1. A step-change improvement is required in the achievement and participation of young people.</p> <p>2. By 2008, 60% of 16-year-olds to achieve equivalent of five GCSE grades A* to C.</p> <p>3. Increase proportion of 19-year-olds who achieve at least Level 2 by 3% points between 2004–2006, and a further 2% points by 2008.</p> <p>4. Reduce the number of young people not in education, training or employment by 2% points by 2010.</p>	<p>1. Emphasis on funding Level 2.</p> <p>2. Tackling the problem of the NEET (young people not in education, training or employment) group by aiming for 90% of young people in learning by 2015.</p> <p>3. By 2013, 85% of 19-year-olds reaching Level 2.</p> <p>4. Review of funding for ESOL.</p> <p>5. Focus on national qualifications in Skills for Life Provision.</p>

would arise from the Foster Review of FE (Foster, 2005), the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and the work of the new Quality Improvement Agency. Over the period of the letters some programmes stayed the course, some disappeared and new programmes were introduced. For example, modern apprenticeships (now called apprenticeships) were introduced before the LSC was set up and continue, with the possibility of being extended to 14-year-olds and adults. The take-up of Curriculum 2000 qualifications was encouraged by Morris in 2001 but never mentioned thereafter. Entry to Employment (E2E), Employer Training Pilots (ETP) later becoming Train to Gain, and Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) are all examples of new initiatives.

The big issues remained the same. These were improving participation and achievement of both adults and young people; addressing literacy and numeracy needs in both adults and young people; raising the standards of both teaching and learning; and promoting equal opportunity and diversity. These objectives were addressed in several of the policy documents referred to above, and it was these documents that were listed as key policy texts by most of those we interviewed.

The operational level: actions on TLA

Adult literacy and numeracy skills are addressed in *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001). In the foreword, Blunkett lists some of the measures that were taking place:

We are investing in high quality training and support for teachers and in the tools they need to do their job—consistent national standards, a common core curriculum, relevant materials and new National tests which will be the benchmark for all literacy and numeracy achievement. (p. 1)

The policies contained in the document include researching ways of motivating learners, identifying different teaching methods, improving assessment, developing teachers, and introducing a rigorous inspection regime. An unstated aim seems to have been to create a teacher-proof curriculum. A possible tension appears on page 3: ‘research projects in each part of the country will explore different ways of motivating learners, meeting their specific needs and helping them acquire new reading, writing and number skills as quickly as possible.’ (DfEE, 2001). The next paragraph describes the production of ‘New national standards, new materials and a common core curriculum leading to National Tests [which] will make sure that the same approach to teaching and learning, based on the most effective practice, is adopted across the country’ (DfEE, 2001). Thus, before the research was undertaken, a range of operational measures were put into place that make assumptions about what might work. What if the research had indicated that the success in motivating learners to meet their specific needs relies on local cultural and contextual factors, as research by Hodkinson *et al.* (2004) indicates? What then is the point of new nationally promoted materials and approaches? There are sound philosophical and psychological arguments against attempting to promote a common strategy supported by common materials and teaching methods in an attempt to meet the ‘specific needs’ of a diverse group of learners (see e.g. Halliday, 1996). Recent work by the Standards Unit seems

to be taking on board more sophisticated models of support and development, e.g. involving teachers working collaboratively with coaches to improve their practice, and it will be interesting to see the independent evaluations of these measures.

The next major policy document relevant to TLA was *Success for All: Reforming Further Education and Training*, (DfES, 2002a) which was a response to inspection reports that identified, among other things, 'widely divergent standards of learner achievement' (p. 4). The strategy to tackle this and related problems has four elements, each of which received mention from some of our interviewees. These elements were:

- **Meeting needs, improving choice** by improving the responsiveness and quality of provision in each area to meet learner, employer and community needs;
- **Putting teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do** by establishing a new Standards Unit to identify and disseminate best practice, which will guide learning and training programmes;
- **Developing the leaders, teachers, lecturers, trainers and support staff of the future** including setting new targets for full and part-time college teachers to be qualified, and developing strong leadership and management through a new leadership college; and
- **Developing a framework for quality and success** by establishing a new planning, funding and accountability system, based on greater partnership and trust, including three-year funding agreements (DfES, 2002a, p. 5).

Success for All thus clearly completes the trajectory from ideological commitments through strategic objectives to operational instruments and structures. In the foreword, the Secretary of State reiterates the government's commitment to social justice and economic success. The four bullet-points above indicate strategic objectives in the statements in bold lettering and then outline the operational practices and instruments that will be used to achieve them. In the final chapter of *Success for All*, implementation through the structural levels is partly addressed. The greatest emphasis is on what will be done at the ministerial and national levels, but there are also milestones to be achieved by LLSCs (e.g. conducting Strategic Area Reviews, StARs) and colleges (e.g. trialling new teaching and learning materials).

Some steering mechanisms proposed in this document are similar to those proposed in *Skills for Life*, for example teacher, trainer and lecturer development, and the identification and dissemination of 'best practice' and indeed 'build[ing] on the experience of the adult basic skills strategy' (DfES, 2002a, p. 12) is an explicit aim of *Success for All* in its efforts to 'put teaching and learning at the heart of what we do'.

21st Century Skills (DfES *et al.*, 2003) was the next major policy document on the LSS, produced this time not just by the DfES but also by the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Department for Work and Pensions. The signatures of the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer are joined by those of the Secretaries of State of the above departments to emphasize the document's importance. Once again the government's commitment to 'the interdependence of social justice and economic success' (DfES *et al.*, 2003, p. 11) was reiterated. Key

strategic objectives relating to teaching and learning included supporting ‘many more learners to re-engage in learning’ and ‘mak[ing] colleges and training providers more responsive to employers’ and learners’ needs’ (p. 10). Two major operational means of achieving these strategic objectives were proposed—‘reforming the qualifications framework’ and ‘raising the effectiveness of further education colleges and training providers’ (p. 14).

Chapter 4 of this document contains a discussion about the relationships between skills development for economic objectives and learning for personal and social purposes. Both are recognized as legitimate goals of government policy, but economic goals are given priority. A clear rationale is provided—without economic inclusion, social exclusion is likely to be ‘compounded’, so social and economic purposes of learning are ‘intertwined’. An important question for an evaluation of government policy is to what extent each of these purposes is addressed in the outcomes of policy, particularly when the needs are so wide and the resources limited.

In 2004 the DfES published its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004b), which took matters forward in two main ways. Firstly the documents cited above were all focused on aspects of the LSS. The *Five Year Strategy* offers a comprehensive view of educational policy from early years through to adult learning. It is a document about lifelong learning. Its second major contribution was the central role given to ‘personalization’:

This [personalisation] is not a vague liberal notion about letting people have what they want ... The system must be both freer and more diverse—with more flexibility to help meet individual needs; and more choices between courses and types of provider, so that there really are different and personalised opportunities available. (Foreword)

Personalization was taken up in the White Paper on FE (DfES, 2006a) and is a key element of the government’s wider strategy of public-sector reform (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2006), as well as the subject of a current consultation process (DfES, 2006). It focuses on the service receivers (i.e. learners), which is appropriate, but neglects the professionals within the service who constitute another important stakeholder constituency.

The rest of the *Five Year Strategy* details proposals of structural changes to create such a system. Clarke’s introduction concludes with a call for both local and central government to ‘move away from direction towards an enabling and empowering role’ (DfES, 2004b, p. 4). Were this to come about, it would represent the reversal of a 20-year trend of increasing centralization in education; but there is little evidence in our fieldwork to suggest that education professionals are being freed from central control. The tension is between greater freedom and greater regulation. Clarke’s third grant letter, cited above, hardly provided a ringing endorsement of greater freedom.

Chapters 6 and 7 are particularly relevant to this paper. Chapter 6, ‘14–19 Education and Training’, sets out the goal for this group, which is ‘Every young person to be well-equipped for adulthood, skilled work and further learning’. There are a number of references in this chapter to TLA, including an indication that the Tomlinson⁴ proposals would be judged by the extent to which they managed to

reduce the 'assessment burden'; an intention to promote a 'greater emphasis on work-related learning'; and an expanded '14–19 offer for those who are disengaged from learning'. Chapter 7, 'Adult Skills', concentrates on the 'lack of skills at Level 2' and 'the large number of adults who lack skills in literacy and numeracy'. Policies aimed at addressing these concerns included Employer Training Pilots (now rolled out as the *Train to Gain* programme, bringing employers and Union Learning Representatives more centre-stage), and adult basic skills provision.

Conclusion: Learning and teaching at the heart of the system?

In this discussion of the different dimensions of policy on TLA in the LSS, we have highlighted three dominant images of learners and learning reform at the ideological level:

- The primary image is of a learner who gains employability skills joining the labour market. Employment is seen as the central requirement for social inclusion. What follows is the emphasis on Level 2 qualifications, which are seen as the minimum benchmark for employment in twenty-first-century occupations, although the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) for the Treasury recommended that Level 3 should be the benchmark if we are to compete internationally. Other motives for learning, while not entirely ignored, are not seen as key drivers.
- Linked closely with this image is one of learners, rather than tutors and learners, at the heart of the system. The underlying assumption is that learners have 'pent-up demand' for learning that is often frustrated by inaccessible learning or poor provision. What follows is an emphasis on creating more flexibility of learning opportunities and promoting 'personalized learning'. Our research with learners and teachers in the LSS suggests that this is a one-sided view of the learning process, which downplays the centrality of the teacher–learner relationship in effective learning and the role of strong institutions. Teachers are almost invisible in the policy rhetoric, or are presented as being in 'deficit'. This image can also idealize and exaggerate 'the agency of learners' and their powers to place themselves at the centre of the LSS without the essential supportive relationships with tutors.
- The third image is one of national agencies enforcing consistency of practice in TLA. What follows is a role for the LSC in purchasing provision in an area, the inspectorates ensuring that national standards are met and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) creating national qualifications specifications. National standards, rather than local diversity, are assumed to have primacy; and the concept of consistency is imposed from above, rather than constructed in negotiation with education professionals. This tension between centrally imposed standards and local innovation is repeated in other public services (see Newman, 2001).

These images strongly influence the kind of instruments that are used to steer the sector. Key targets for the LSS focus on the achievement by learners of Level 2 qualifications as the threshold for employment. Funding is skewed toward provision

with employment outcomes. Initiatives such as the Employer Training Pilots were initially focused on sub-Level 2 learners. Support mechanisms such as Standards Unit provision stress the universal application of what is deemed to be 'best' or 'good' practice. As a result, some of the theoretical tensions that Kooiman outlines are exemplified in the workings of the English LSS. When framing governing instruments, administrations are faced with three challenges—how to cope simultaneously with a dynamic environment; with diversity; and with complexity.

Instruments to deal with dynamism require strong and accurate feedback systems. One of the weaknesses of recent policy in the LSS is the failure by government to wait long enough to allow informed feedback to reach them. There must be a temptation for them to act on the impressions of advisers or react to short-term media issues, instead of waiting to consider feedback from those who implement or 'deliver' policy. In fact, there is no official feedback loop within the sector that allows policy-makers to get a good grip on what is happening at the 'front line'.

Dealing with diversity, according to Kooiman, requires a careful balance of equity and responsiveness to local needs. The government has a strong rhetoric of decentralization, which seems to accord with the current European focus on the principle of subsidiarity, yet seems unable to trust local administrations and providers with the type of flexibility of funding and control over their own initiatives that would enable this rhetoric to be realized in practice. Even teachers have come to be regarded as 'deliverers' of nationally produced materials through nationally identified processes rather than as actors who develop important educational relationships with students, adapt specific practices to particular contexts and who are themselves capable of innovation. Quality of practice is 'assured' by external inspection by national bodies rather than through professional trust and local accountability, although there is to be a move toward more imposed self-evaluation (LSC, 2005).

The LSS is extraordinarily complex, yet it is being steered by simplistic and blunt instruments. This results in what we term 'rattlesnake farming', a metaphor derived from the practice of several states in the USA to offer bounties for rattlesnake tails in order to reduce the population of what were considered pests. Some entrepreneurial individuals started to farm the snakes to collect the bounties. In a similar way, crude targets, for example for meeting Level 2 qualifications, can be 'farmed' by providers who concentrate on those learners who can easily achieve these to the exclusion of learners with greater needs.

Government actions are heavily influenced by whoever happens to be in the position of leadership. Until recently, the LSS was faced with two sources of leadership, each of whom appeared to have a different image of what the sector should look like. On the one hand, there was the DfES, with an emphasis on planned provision and local collaboration; on the other hand, the No. 10 Policy Unit with an agenda of centralization as well as local diversity and competition. In six years there have been five Secretaries of State for Education and Skills. The analysis of the grant letters illustrates differences in emphasis and approach, and this in a period of administration by the same political party.

The image promoted in the early years of the Labour administration was of creating a stakeholder society. By the rhetoric of putting teaching and learning at the heart of the sector, one might have expected that teachers and learners would be considered key stakeholders in the LSS. Rather what has emerged in the governance of the LSS is a complex mix of three policy-making models (Raffe & Spours, 2007):

- **Politicized**—policy is driven to a large extent by politically informed targets, which legitimates far-reaching interventions in the LSS by No. 10, the Treasury and Ministers.
- **Traditional bureaucratic** in the classical Weberian framework—control is located at the centre through a carefully constructed hierarchy with tightly framed rules and procedures governing the roles of each level.
- **Devolved and collaborative**—at the same time, there are moves to create devolved delivery partnerships at regional and local levels.

Our argument is that presently the first two models dominate the third. Clear examples of the first model include the imposition of city academies on some local authorities by the Prime Minister's policy advisers against local resistance; and the fact that the Leitch Review of Skills was driven by the Treasury, not by the DfES. With respect to the first of these examples, we have evidence of this policy cutting right across a strong, locally generated partnership that underpinned coordinated delivery of post-compulsory education. In our early interviews with officials in the LSC, we had several comments about the extent of the 'micromanagement' of the Council by DfES and of the rules applied by local LSCs in their dealings with providers. This exemplifies the bureaucratic approach. Collaborative delivery models do exist sometimes, even between such apparent competitors as further education colleges and independent providers of education and training; however, these are often fragile contractual arrangements that may be jeopardised by moves towards contestability.

Putting learning and teaching at the heart of the system requires more than writing the words in the text. It requires a fundamental shift in the prevailing governing images and practices of TLA within the LSS, and a rethink of the kind of instruments that would steer the system in the direction of strong relationships and empowered organizations in a culture where teachers and teaching in postcompulsory education are valued, well resourced and supported. This seems to be envisaged in the latest LSC proposals (LSC, 2005). Only time will tell if these proposals lead to the loosening of the iron grip of centralized micromanagement that has been the recent dominant mode of governance of the LSS so that the government are able, with its partners, to declare: '*together*, we put learning and teaching at the heart of everything we do.'

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2. Recent discussions with policy-makers suggest that the most recent official description is the term ‘further education system’, rather than ‘learning and skills sector/system’.
3. Sfard (1998) discusses two metaphors of learning: the acquisition metaphor that assumes learning to be a processes of acquiring knowledge, skills or meaning, and the participation metaphor that views learning as participation in social activities.
4. Mike Tomlinson was commissioned by the government to lead an inquiry and make recommendations for the reform of qualifications for the 14–19 age group.

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