

ISSN 1466-1535

**The limits of the possible: shaping the learning and
skills landscape through a shared policy narrative**

SKOPE Research Paper No. 86 June 2009

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Cardiff and Oxford Universities**

Editor's Foreword

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If the decision is going to be made by the facts, then everyone's facts, as long as they are relevant, are equal. If the decision is going to be made on the basis of people's opinions, then mine count for a lot more. (James Barksdale, CEO of Netscape, quoted in Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006: 74)

Introduction

This paper seeks to map the key concepts, images and theoretical bases of the policy story that surrounds education and training policy in England, and to expose the implicit and explicit assumptions that drive the policy discourse(s) on skills. To put it another way, the aim is to explore how the stories that underlie policy serve to structure the geography of the 'land of the possible' wherein policy makers come to determine and then promulgate what they can and cannot seek to do in this field. In attempting this, the paper will also address one of the key policy technologies whereby the state (in the shape of national politicians, civil servants and senior staff in government agencies) attempts to maintain control of policy debate and resultant activity in this field – the development and maintenance of a shared explanatory narrative to underpin strategic policy development and resultant interventions.

This mapping exercise is primarily concerned with the post-compulsory and adult phases of learning and with the more vocational end of the learning spectrum, rather than with the traditional heartland of education policy (children, classrooms, teachers, and schools and universities). In English 'machinery of government' terms, it is thus more to do with the Learning and Skills sector, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (and in future the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)) and further education (FE) and private training providers. This is because schools, higher education (HE) and traditional 'academic' learning have tended to be governed by a slightly different, albeit increasingly overlapping set of assumptions and priorities (for an excellent examination of the story on schools see Ball, 2008). This point notwithstanding, with the political capital being sunk into the new 14-19 Diplomas and the coming of the Leitch agenda and its stress on the role of HE and Level 4 skills, a growing integration of the narrative being examined here into the thinking underpinning policy on schools and universities seems a possible outcome.

It is also important to be clear what this paper is not trying to do. It does not pretend to offer a model for the entire education and training policy process, nor provide an analysis of the nature of the (extended) state.

The Key Theories, Concepts, Ideologies and Images that Underlie Policy

The section that follows tries to identify the main strands of thought and theory that have underpinned the basic assumptions that have guided policymakers when contemplating what lines of policy development are open to them and might be desirable to follow. An important point to make at the outset is that the picture presented here is one made at a certain point in time, and essentially reports the results of the gradual accretion of layer upon layer of policy statements and of a sequence of iterations and re-iterations of policy thinking over a 30-year period that is broadly akin to the process through which sedimentary rock is laid down. As will be discussed below, this incremental evolution and repetition has served to create a framework of thought wherein one element reinforces the next and where reference back to early statements of the same idea or policy are seen to imbue the latest version with a form of canonical status. In other words, what is examined below did not arrive as a full-blown body of thought and theory – it developed quite slowly and sometimes haltingly, though with an underlying general trend that, at each successive stage, the claims being made for the economic (and more latterly social) role of skills were increased. There is no attempt to chart the historical evolution of this body of thought. That would be a different, and quite massive task. The aim here is to describe and analyse it as it currently stands.

The analysis that follows draws upon a range of policy documents – the most important of which are:

- DfEE, 1998
- LSC, 2001
- H M Treasury, 2002
- DfES/HMT/DTI/DWP, 2003
- DfES/DTI/HMT/DWP, 2005
- DfES, 2004
- LSC, 2005
- DfES, 2006
- Leitch Review, 2005 & 2006
- DIUS, 2007.

with, in addition, speeches given by Prime Ministers Blair (2007) and Brown (2007a; 2007b), a range of documentation from bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Sector

Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and a host of other government quangos. It also draws upon the author's experience of the skills debate as it has been conducted over the last quarter of a century or more, and of sitting in on various policy deliberations being conducted by bodies such as H. M. Treasury, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), the National Skills Task Force (NSTF), the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the SSDA, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), the Cabinet Office and the LSC.

As this list suggests, the narrative is not the work of a single government department – it encompasses elements contributed or embellished by all the above named bodies, as well as by individual politicians, their advisors, senior civil servants and quango managers, and a variety of policy entrepreneurs (as Ball (2008) terms them), such as Charles Leadbeater. However, its central guardian and evangelist has tended to be the government department with prime responsibility for skills issues – DfEE, then DfES and now DIUS.

This narrative covers the nature of the 'skills problem/crisis', its causes, and the range of policy interventions that can potentially be deployed to meet it. This narrative was first constructed in its present form by central government policy makers during the 1980s and its fundamental principles have not shifted since then, though the nuances of the story have altered and the tale has been considerably elaborated as it has passed from teller to teller. In historical terms, its equivalent might be taken to be the party 'line' within Communist governments and parties - an all-encompassing story that determines what can and cannot be contemplated and discussed. In other words, as will be discussed at greater length below, the narrative delineates the borders of the possible (in policy terms), and, equally importantly, what is not 'available for discussion' (a phrase sometimes deployed by English civil servants to warn people off topics that are either deemed subversive, or where ministers have already decided on a particular line of action and where there is therefore no point whatsoever in any further debate).

The Major Elements of the Current Narrative

The narrative has centred around the following key elements:

- Globalisation is an unstoppable force, and is creating worldwide product, capital and labour markets, wherein the UK and its individual citizens/workers must compete (HMT/DfEE/DWP/DTI, 2004; Blair, 2007;

Brown, 2007a). The chief means of adjusting to these challenges is to invest in the human capital of the workforce, since it is assumed that this confers competitive advantages (to nations, enterprises and individuals) that are hard to imitate. This reading of human capital theory has been derived from a policy-oriented economics literature (for example, Reich, 1983; and Thurow, 1995). This body of work assumes that when it comes to skills, more is better as skill is the key to economic success, particularly in a modern, supposedly knowledge-driven global economy where other elements of production can be geographically relocated or are open to imitation. More and better skills are thus, 'the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation' (Leitch Review, 2006:2), with human capital now, 'the key determinant of corporate and country success' (Blair, 2007:2).

- As a result, skills are one of the few areas where, within a generally de-regulationist and laissez-faire approach to economic policy, government can or should seek to intervene (though not in terms of prescribing what employers should do). In many instances, the need for government interventions is justified via the problem of market failure and the poaching of skilled labour (see Keep, 2006a).
- Given globalisation and heightened international competition, a critical importance is assigned to international benchmarking of stocks of skills (as proxied by qualifications held by the national population/workforce) – see Keep, 2008. These comparisons have been deployed in order to create a sense of 'moral panic' about our relative performance on skill, leverage the case for greater public investment in education and training, and press the need for England/the UK to stockpile more skills/qualifications in order to 'catch up' with overseas rivals, much in the manner of a turn of the twentieth century battleship building race (Keep and Mayhew, 2004), or a post-WW2 nuclear arms race (see Brown et al, 2008). In other words, benchmarking provides the basis for the creation of a sense of national crisis (see HMT/DfES/DWP/DTI, 2004; the Leitch Review 2005 & 2006; and DfES, 2007 for details thereof). For an excellent early example of this type of benchmarking in support of policy development readers are directed to *Competence and Competition* (1984), and for the latest (and somewhat less analytically robust) version to the Leitch Review of Skills (2005 & 2006). For further reflections on this topic, see Keep, 2008. The import and policy prescriptions attached to these global benchmarking exercises may well be deeply flawed (see Brown et al, 2008).
- De-regulated, flexible labour markets deliver the best economic results (Blair, 2007; Brown, 2007a). Therefore, training should be organised on a largely voluntary basis, with minimal prescription and regulation of what employers should be expected to provide. The main safeguards for workers in terms of preventing exploitation within the workplace are twofold. First, via a minimum platform of universal individual employment rights (for example, on health & safety; entitlement to paid holidays, maternity and paternity leave). This platform is now in place, and no further major extensions are anticipated. Second, as Blair outlines (2007), if people feel they are being poorly treated or undervalued in their

current workplace, their skills will enable them to find better employment elsewhere.

- In terms of an underlying philosophy of how the labour market and the employment relationship function, the stance is unitarist rather than pluralist in perspective – fundamental material differences between workers and managers do not need to exist and, ‘the best business works today as a partnership’ (Blair, 2007:6). Conflict between workers, and capital and management is ultimately futile, since change (the need for which is identified by management) cannot be averted. The role for collective action is therefore limited, because the human capital that is being traded in a series of individual employee/employer bargains and relationships is held by individuals, not the collective. Bargaining power hence rests with each worker, not with any collective manifestation or expression of worker power. The role of unions, insofar as they have a role (they receive just four brief mentions in the Leitch Review Final Report, 2006), is, ‘to work in partnership with employers to ensure profitable companies that take care of their staff’ (Blair, 2007:5), and to supply services to members, of which help with upskilling and re-skilling is one.
- In terms of the changing structure of the labour market, the dominant strand in the narrative has been a belief in the impending impact of cataclysmic and immutable shifts in the nature of paid work – the end of careers, portfolio working, and, most importantly, the rise of the knowledge driven economy and knowledge workers. The bulk of the labour force either are, or will become, knowledge workers, or as Tony Blair put it, ‘in a sense, a whole economy has passed away... In the new knowledge economy, human capital, the skills people possess, is critical’ (Blair, 2007:3). The economy of the future will require far more highly skilled employees than now (Leitch, 2005 & 2006; Blair, 2007: 2; Brown, 2007a). The persistence of the bottom end of the labour market and of monotonous, low paid, dead-end work has generally either been ignored, or it has been assumed can be tackled by upskilling the workers who fill these positions (see DCSF/DIUS, 2007; LSC, 2007), though who would then occupy these jobs is never vouchsafed.
- A belief that increasing wage inequality is the result of skill-biased technical change rather than, for example, the decline of collective bargaining (Leitch Review, 2005).
- Because of the foregoing assumptions, both economic performance AND social justice and mobility can best be served through improvements in the skill levels of individual workers (DIUS, 2007). As the Leitch Review’s Final Report declared, ‘Our nation’s skills are not world class and we run the risk that this will undermine the UK’s long-term prosperity. Productivity continues to trail many of our main international comparators. Despite recent progress, the UK has serious social disparities with high levels of child poverty, poor employment rates for the disadvantaged, regional disparities and relatively high income inequality. Improving our skill levels can address all these problems’ (2006: 1). This elision of individual and collective wellbeing (Ball, 2008: 17) has been one of the

main innovations injected into the narrative as it has evolved under New Labour.

- Skills supply, not demand, has been deemed to be the central problem. If more skills are supplied, they will automatically be used and productivity and economic competitiveness thereby enhanced because supply is assumed (in a form of Say's Law) to create its own demand (what the Treasury term a 'supply-push' effect, HMT, 2001). Grubb and Ryan dub this belief a 'build and they will come' myth (Grubb and Ryan, 1999).
- The firm is best treated as a black box into which inputs – such as enhanced skills and a better educated workforce - are injected and from which will automatically emerge enhanced economic outcomes – greater productivity or higher value added goods and services. Policy makers do not need to know about what happens within the box (and hence the productive process) and it has normally been deemed illegitimate for policy to try to intervene within this 'sealed unit', as this is best left to management acting rationally in response to the invisible hand of market forces (which in this case are assumed not subject to market failure).
- Learning is a uniform and uncomplicated process that can easily be managed through a simple input/output model. The importance of this assumption that learning is a simple activity cannot be over-stated. As one informant – a member of the national LSC's Council – noted in discussions with the author, since its inception, the national LSC council has never conducted any full discussion of what learning meant or how it might best be achieved (see Coffield, 2008 on the implications of this assumption and the need for it to change).
- The over-riding goal of publicly-funded education and training is to further economic aims and to boost competitiveness. Learning that seeks to satisfy other, non-vocational needs is of much lesser importance, and can expect to receive only very limited public support – as Coffield notes, what the LSC terms 'learning for personal fulfilment, civic participation and community development' now accounts for a tiny fraction of the LSC's overall budget (Coffield, 2008: 49).

Secondary Elements

Below these primary assumptions, the narrative has embraced a set of subsidiary, but important, secondary beliefs that relate to the style and manner in which the learning and skills sector should best be designed and managed:

- The centre (in the shape of ministers and central government departments) know bests, in nearly all circumstances and at nearly all times. It therefore follows that strategic policy formation is and should be the sole preserve of ministers, advisors and senior civil servants – even within a system that at a rhetorical level is said to be evidence-based, employer-led and student-centred. At the same time, micro-management from the centre has been judged to be both possible and desirable. For instance, as Coffield demonstrates (2008: 44-46), the LSC's activities are currently governed by

seven priorities and no less than 86 goals or targets, some of which themselves break down into a further tier of subordinate targets.

- Power relationships are best managed in a top-down, command and control manner. Targets, set without meaningful consultation by the centre, are the most appropriate way of driving the system, with the Leitch targets forming the latest example. It should be noted that the central importance attached by policy makers to management by target has a profound impact on what can and cannot be funded by government (whatever it is has to be measurable and that normally means achievement of a whole qualification) and what constitutes ‘training’ in the eyes of policy makers.
- Following on from the above, qualifications are a good and sufficient proxy for skills and therefore an ideal key performance indicator for the education and training system, even though research indicates that the vast bulk of skill formation in work is uncertified and there exists no system of certification for the bulk of generic skills.
- Trust is a one-way street. Those at lower levels in the system must trust their superiors. Those in charge of the system, on the other hand, normally cannot trust those at lower levels.
- Multi-layer planning mechanisms, based around a simple matching model, can and will ensure that the supply of skill meets demand – implicitly both from employers and individuals, even though these are known to often be in conflict. Despite a great deal of talk about a ‘demand-led’ system and an end to planning (DIUS, 2007), in reality (Hodgson & Spours, 2008) the likelihood is that planning will persist no matter what institutional configuration funds post-19 learning. It is unclear what practical impact this planning activity has upon the education and training activities actually delivered.
- FE colleges and their staff (and to a less obvious extent private training providers) are deemed to be habitually unresponsive to their customers (however defined) and continually in need of prodding, incentivising, berating, threatening and performance managing in detail in order to make them more responsive.
- The importance attached to the desirability of marketisation and contestability in learning and skills provision has waxed and waned (Youth Credits were an early and disastrous foray into this field), but currently seems to be on an upward curve, with the opening up of almost the LSC’s entire £3 billion post-19 budget via Train to Gain and Skills Accounts.
- Insofar as policy is ever acknowledged to fail, it does so because of failures of implementation and project management, not because of fundamental design flaws (Keep, 2006b).

It will be apparent that these secondary beliefs allow the narrative to encode a set of norms about how power relationships are structured within the system. The command and control nature of the relationship between the DCSF and DIUS and their subordinate bodies is often masked and softened by the deployment of a rhetoric

of partnership (Keep, 2006a), though as Coffield et al observe it is ‘partnership of a particular kind’ (2005: 643). As one respondent in their research argued, ‘I wouldn’t pretend it was a partnership of equals: it’s very much a parent-child relationship. You know: “We want you to do this. We want you to do it in this way. Just go and do it”’ (2005: 643). This point will be enlarged upon below.

The narrative thus sets the broad parameters for relationships between the centre and subordinate agencies and actors. It does not pretend to rule out or seek to control the potential for overt or covert inter-agency rivalry or conflict. Nor is primarily focused on trying to concert the detailed implementation of policy or the practice of delivery agents. It encodes a set of basic beliefs that justify and support the continuity of the broad overall direction of strategy, and as such is but one weapon within a broader armoury of central control over the education and training system.

It should also be noted that many of the primary and secondary assumptions outlined above are either weakly supported by the evidence available, or are at a degree of variance with reality as it is reported to exist by the extant body of scholarly research. This has also proved to be a much smaller stumbling block to policy formation and promulgation than might perhaps have been expected, an issue which will also be expanded upon in what follows.

Missing Elements

As ever, at least as important as what is included in the narrative are those elements that have explicitly been excluded from it. The narrative has refused, to a greater or lesser degree, to cover or engage with a whole range of issues that research reveals are important to any meaningful understanding of how vocational learning operates and what motivates the various actors within any national education and training system.

The following, for example, are more or less wholly absent:

- The use by individuals of the outcomes of education and training as positional goods in support of their efforts to secure a finite (at any given moment) supply of ‘good’ jobs, and thus a desire on the part of some actors to limit the supply of high quality education and training (Brown, 2003).
- The role of employers as providers of education and training and as consumers of the system’s outputs.
- The dangers of ‘welfare dependency’ in an education and training system where government increasingly intervenes to pay for things that employers are reluctant or choose not to fund (Keep, 2006a).

- Many aspects of institutional arrangements in other countries (even within the UK) – e.g. social partnership, devolution of power to elected local authorities, etc.
- The importance of product market strategy in determining the demand for skills and how they are used (Ashton & Sung, 2006; Keep, Mayhew & Payne, 2006).
- The importance of work organisation, job design and labour process and industrial relations/people management systems in determining what skills are needed and how effectively they are deployed within the productive process (Ashton & Sung, 2006; Keep, Mayhew & Payne, 2006).
- Management theory about the diversity of competitive models available to firms (see Storey & Salaman, 2008).
- Theory and research on the political economy of skill.
- Theory and research about how learning takes place (Coffield, 2008).

There are two important and inter-related points to make here. First, as noted above, the core theoretical basis of the narrative is an extremely simple reading of human capital theory, and a great deal of the research evidence that is deployed in support of the narrative in official documents springs from rate of return analyses or calculations of the wage premia that accrue to those possessing certain qualifications relative to the earnings of those with lower levels of qualification (see Leitch Review, 2005 & 2006). This paper is not the place for a detailed critique of either human capital theory or rate of return analyses. The key point to note is that both are open to criticism (see Coffield, 1999; Keep, Mayhew & Corney, 2002; Keep, 2009) and while providing useful insights, neither separately nor combined do they form a sufficiently broad base to support the weight of policy formation and the expectations attached to resultant policy moves.

Second, this officially constructed narrative has dealt with the counter-factual by ignoring it almost completely. There is little if any attempt by policy makers to engage with most of the bodies of literature associated with the topics listed above. They are simply deemed so unimportant, so at variance with received official wisdom, or so patently ideologically incorrect as to be unworthy of dignifying with official attention (even to take the effort to explain why they lack validity). A prime example here would be the bibliography of the Leitch Review Final Report (2006), which is relatively short, and which draws very heavily on research on the rate of return to various types and levels of qualifications. By contrast, there are only single references to the research on the relationship between skills and product market

strategy, the use of qualifications in the recruitment and selection process (all the government's own, extensive research on this key topic is ignored), and to the links between skills policies and economic development; and none at all to the extant bodies of work on how workplace learning/training takes place, the changing meaning of 'skill', and the factors that determine demand for and usage of skill in workplace settings. It is as though most of the last decade's education and training, business strategy and economic development policy research (in the UK and elsewhere) had never taken place. As a result of this highly selective reading of the evidence, the Leitch Review produced analysis and prescription that has a very limited hold on the actual complexities of the skills linkages to, and interactions with, both competitive strategy and labour markets (Centre for Enterprise, 2007).

Thus, the no-go areas of ideology and research in turn have determined those avenues of policy that public debate is not permitted to explore. Reviews of international research on economic development and education and training suggest a wide range of different forms that policy interventions might take. The problem is that the filters provided by the narrative have meant that many of them are not available for discussion. A by no means exhaustive list of these excluded items has included:

- Regulation of the labour market to limit casualised hire and fire policies.
- Regulation of the labour market to shut off access to competitive strategies based on low wages (e.g. significantly and sustained rises in national minimum wage, strong trade unions)
- Full-blown social partnership arrangements
- Sectoral bargaining arrangements that cover skills
- Strong trade unions able to conclude sectoral agreements on skill
- Statutory forms of co-determination in the workplace
- An apprenticeship system backed by strong societal expectations and legal obligations that reduce exploitative practices by employers
- A coherent vision of what type of economy and employment is being aimed for
- National industrial policy
- Creation of conditions that ensure 'patient and competent' capital (i.e. reform of the banking system and capital markets)

Overview

The encapsulation offered above is at best a thumbnail sketch of what is, in some senses at least, a grand, if rather shallow, design. For a full understanding of both the strengths (in terms of internal coherence) and the weaknesses of the narrative (in terms of its divorce from wider bodies of theory and from the reality of learning), readers are directed to the following documents, which represent the narrative at its fullest level of development: LSC, 2001; H M Treasury, 2002; DfES/HMT/DTI/DWP, 2003; DfES/DTI/HMT/DWP, 2005; DfES, 2004 & 2006; Leitch Review, 2005 & 2006; DIUS, 2007.

The Style of the Narrative

This paper does not attempt any in-depth analysis of the discourse(s) through which the narrative is conveyed. That would represent a major enterprise that would require a separate paper. For an illustration of the essential continuity of the form and substance of the debate, see Mansfield (2000).

However, two brief sallies into this area are worth making. First, it needs to be stressed that the language around 'skill' is often deployed within the narrative with a lack of precision that is both deliberate and depressing. For example, official documents slide from skills to qualifications, and from unqualified (or qualified below government target levels) to unskilled and unemployed/lacking employability as though the terms were synonymous. One of the worst culprits on this count was the Leitch Review, both of whose reports conflate skill and qualification, despite at the same time acknowledging in passing the inadequacy of qualifications as a good measure of skill.

Second, the choice of language used to drive the narrative and the policy debates that surround it has a significant role to play in helping to close off opportunities for reflection and debate (Stronach & Morris, 1994; Trowler, 2001; Finlay et al, 2006:5-6). A flavour of this style of discourse is offered below. It is derived from notes taken by the author at a workshop session at a DfES conference to mark the launch of the *Progress Report* on the formation of the Skills Strategy in 2003. The phrases are taken from contemporaneous notes of consecutive speeches given by two speakers – one a very senior DfES official, the other a very senior LSC official. No break has been recorded in the transcription as both deployed identical modes of communication and approaches to vocabulary:

Targeting resources... appropriate learning opportunities... transparent structures... cross-linking rhetorics... commitment to co-ordination... addressing financial barriers... opportunities for access and progression... engaging with employers... suite of strategies and policies... reaching out to learners... clear and flexible pathways... processes that can support our key strategies... the *Success for All Agenda*... coherence in provision... significant opportunity... funding reform... a range of key issues... demand-led... a much more strategic approach to provision... supportive and hopefully accessible documents... brokerage function... building successful learning brands... a much more deep-seated set of cultural changes... need to drill down... sustainable input and change... moving with pace and achieving mass change... aligning planning, funding and delivery systems... engaged with those clients... signposting viable routes... mainstream that activity... where partnership is real, transformatory and genuine... high quality advice and guidance...

Besides the enthusiasm for redundant adjectives, it will be noted that the model or prime source of this discourse is the modern management textbook, seemingly ideologically neutral, devoid of much thought or meaning (and therefore hard to disagree with), but ideal for conveying the impression of rationality, inevitability, and forward momentum – what Stronach and Morris (1994: 13) term ‘Good Words’.

In this regard, style and form follow sense and purpose, since the overwhelming central drive behind institutional design in the learning and skills sector has been to promote the kind of centralised forecasting, planning and control mechanisms advocated in late 1950s operation research texts, to use it to deliver consecutive waves of change, and to manage all this by means of a very traditional Modernist machine bureaucracy (Keep, 2002). Stronach and Morris observation that, ‘vocationalism is the modernist project par excellence, expressing modernism’s core values of progress, prosperity, technology, individual and social self-realisation, and the future health and wealth of capitalism’ (1994: 17) is hence apposite. Indeed one of the senior architects of the narrative revealed in an interview with the *Times Educational Supplement*, that his view of his role in designing and superintending reform of the education and training system was that of acting as a ‘project engineer’ (Nash, 2005: 2). Interestingly, this tendency towards a use of a ‘business language’ vocabulary by DIUS has been sharply criticised for its vacuity and inappropriateness by the House of Commons Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (2009a).

The Continuity of the Narrative

As noted above, this narrative has been constructed gradually and incrementally over a 30 year period (the start date is assumed to be around 1976 and James Callaghan's Ruskin Speech), though its foundations go back far further, into mid- to late- 19th Century debates about Britain's apparent relative economic decline (Barnett, 1986; Sanderson, 1988; Merson, 1995). It reflects an underlying continuity in the ideological assumptions behind the general direction of policy development over the last two decades or more (Mansfield, 2000; Keep, 2006b). Thus, in the field of learning and skills the basis for policy under New Labour has not moved in a direction that fundamentally diverges from education and training policy under the Thatcher and Major administrations.

Insofar as New Labour have altered and enlarged the basic story, the main variations are threefold. First, as a result of a more buoyant economy and unemployment levels much lower than those experienced in the 1980s (at least until now), there has been less need for large-scale training/work experience schemes to reduce the claimant headcount. At the same time, perceptions of major problems with income inequality and low levels of social mobility have meant pressure on government to address social equity issues. Skills policies have been viewed as a means of dealing with these concerns without requiring government to engage in more heavily overt and direct forms of redistribution (Blair, 2007). As a result, there has been growing confidence among policy makers in the range of policy expectations and goals that can be loaded onto education and training (for example, enhanced social inclusion and social mobility) (see Keep, 2002 & 2006b).

Second, New Labour have increased the overall level of investment in skill. In this regard, it should be noted that the lion's share of the extra cash has gone into schools and pre-19 provision, and non-HE post-19 provision has not fared anything like so well.

Third, under New Labour the centralising tendencies put in motion by previous Conservative administrations have been moved up a gear, with the range of powers given to ministers increasing with every piece of legislation. Despite deploying the rhetoric of partnership, the centre has taken more and more responsibility unto itself and has appeared exceedingly reluctant to share this with any other party (Keep, 2006a). Design, in detail, from the centre has been the order of the day. For example, as Michael Young has noted (personal communication with

author) it is hard to imagine the current English administration funding anything so anarchic and devolved as the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI).

The generally high degree of evolutionary continuity in the basic structural foundations and premises of policy has been disguised by hyperactivism (Dunleavy & O’Leary, 1987) – the ceaseless whirl of policy pronouncements, and institutional and programmatic reform that has occurred over the last twenty years (Mansfield, 2000). New schemes, and new bodies to deliver them, have helped hide the essential sameness in the overall direction of policy and of the narrow conceptualisation that underpins it (Coffield, 2008: 43).

The Function of the Narrative – Limiting the Possible, Controlling the Present, Defining the Future

The effects and uses of this narrative

As noted above, English education and training policy formation and the means by which it is delivered, is, by mainstream European standards, extremely centralised and top-down. The major roles allotted to elected local government and to social partnership arrangements in many European countries are largely absent here (Ainley, 2001). Given the scale and complexity of the range of policy issues and streams of delivery that are planned, funded and managed by central government a key issue is how to co-ordinate this ‘new Leviathan’ (Ainley, 2001) and its multi-faceted activities and responsibilities. The following comment from David Normington, the then-permanent secretary at the then newly-formed DfES, illustrates this problem:

Today the department – and the whole education and training system – is at the heart of the Government’s drive to transform public services. The days when the education department set the legislative framework, hoped that local education authorities would take most of the major decisions, and occasionally signalled policy changes in circulars are long past. The scale of the tasks we face will not allow it. (Normington, 2001: 17)

This quote both illuminates the need for the narrative, and, as we have seen, reflects some of its central tenets, not least that skills policy is far too important to be left to or determined by people outside central government.

In England, DIUS and DCSF have to direct and co-ordinate the activities of a range of bodies, some of which (QCA, Ofsted, the SSCs, the RDAs (and their associated Regional Skills Partnerships), the LSC (and its regional and local arms), Education/Business Partnerships, the Learning and Skills Network, Connexions and

Local Authorities) are creatures of government, while others are to a greater or lesser extent independent organisations (e.g. awarding bodies, UCAS and the Campaign for Learning).

One key means by which the frames of thought and action of these various tiers of organisation are concerted is through the creation and maintenance by central government of a shared narrative, the bones of which have been sketched in above. The creation of such narratives or ‘myths’ as a means of structuring decision making and interaction within and between organisations has best been expounded by Boje, Fedor and Rowland (1982). They argue that myths are forged as a means of establishing and maintaining shared meanings and understandings:

Myth making is an adaptive mechanism whereby groups in an organization maintain logic frameworks within which to attribute meaning to activities and events. The meanings that organize past activities and events into a system of logic then become the basis for legitimizing present and future behaviors... Without such an adaptive system, the technological and administrative structure would lack sufficient shared meaning to serve as a basis for coordinated behavior in the face of excessive uncertainty. For those who become socialized into an organization, myths constitute a factual and highly objective reality. They are a major part of the taken-for-granted assumptions and common-sense theories of organizational experience... A myth is constructed to exemplify why the given practices and procedures are the ‘only way’ the organization can function effectively... Myths are a form of ‘bounding’, permitting meaningful organizational behavior to occur, while glossing over excessive complexity, turbulence, or ambiguity. Myths narrow the horizon in which organizational life is allowed to make sense. (Boje, Fedor & Rowland, 1982:18).

In addition to justifying/sanctifying practices and procedures as the ‘only way’ things can function, the systemic mythic narrative that has underlain the policy discourse of English education and training in the learning and skills sector has also encoded a set of ideological assumptions about public policy in terms of why and in what ways it is legitimate for the state to intervene in the area of skill formation. In essence, as we shall see, these ideological assumptive beliefs have stressed the impossibility or inadvisability of intervention in the regulation of product, capital or labour markets, and have posited the Learning and Skills sector as a means – indeed the chief means – by which the state can legitimately seek to improve national competitiveness and social justice (Keep, 2006a).

The multiple functions of the narrative

As Ball (2008: 5) observes:

Policy discourses... organise their own specific rationalities, making particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and 'true'. Discourses mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than simply reflect social reality... the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of their conditions of acceptance and enactment. They construct the inevitable and the necessary.

Thus, the narrative device underpinning learning and skills policy has served a number of purposes. It:

- Provides a relatively simple 'story' about the skills 'problem' that can be understood by all actors and forms a shared basis for action. Its simplicity is its strength.
- Explains why skills policy is so important to desired economic and social goals and justifies government intervention (due to market failure) and funding/power/resources/political attention for the education and training system
- Provides a monolithic 'received wisdom' analysis of the nature of the problem, which obviates the need for further reflection or thought.
- Encapsulates and standardises the body of theory upon which policy is based (market failure, weak information, supply weaknesses, etc.)

This narrative has therefore been viewed by its creators as a means of:

- Obtaining and retaining material resources for education and training policies and the institutional framework that delivers them. Discussions the author has held with members of the Leitch Review team suggest that one of the key goals of the Review (and the DfES who were co-sponsoring the Review), was to produce a case that would prise additional resources for skills policy from H M Treasury.
- Saving time, by removing the need for individual policy makers to think through or reconsider the fundamental bases of policy. These can be taken as fixed and given.
- Helping create and reinforce collective identity and common purpose, thereby helping 'concert' the various elements and levels of the education and training system by providing a common 'worldview' and implicit mission statement that is shared by staff in both DIUS and DCSF and also their many subordinate agencies.
- Delineating what is acceptable thought/lines of policy development, thereby inducing a self-discipline through common beliefs that helps ward off the danger of subordinate education and training bodies becoming motivated to develop new lines of thought or policy.
- Fending off and/or rubbishing externally generated attempts to shift to any new paradigm and/or modify policy responses (Ball, 2008: 18).

Another important purpose served by the narrative is to provide continuity (what script writers term ‘backstory’) for everything that the education and training policy community does. This is highly important in a world where both ministers and civil servants are constantly moving between jobs. Since 1997 there have been six Secretaries of State for Education and Skills/Children, Families and Schools, and as Tuckett (2008: 8) points out, ‘in the past 20 years there have been 15 junior ministers in post with responsibilities for adult learning, and 15 different civil servants overseeing the work’. This style of deploying the senior management cadres within central government leads to massive and continual memory loss among those who construct and control the debate (see Higham and Yeomans, 2007 for an interesting account of causes and the implications of what they term ‘policy amnesia’ in English 14-19 policy).

An additional factor has been the growth of consultants as part of the ‘machinery of thought’ in government – consultants, by their nature, are always just passing through. These problems are compounded by the lack of other, independent centres of memory or power – for instance, England has no equivalent of Federal Germany’s institute for vocational learning - BiBB. At senior levels in the English education and training policy community, the past is indeed another country, and the vast bulk of policy makers have neither the incentive, inclination nor means to visit it except via the received wisdom embedded in the extant policy narrative. Thus, civil servants or junior ministers who arrive from outside the education and training world are provided with a ready-made worldview and theory of action.

Transmission mechanisms

How has the narrative been transmitted and replicated through the education and training system? The answer has lain in:

- Ministerial statements, speeches and press releases
- Major central government and government agency policy documents
- Letters of guidance to agencies
- Government and government agency newsletters
- Speeches and articles by senior staff in agencies
- The vast mass of minor policy documents
- Government and governmental agency conferences and seminars
- Training courses for civil servants and agency staff

- The expectations and goals embedded in the performance management systems (PMS) and targets that cascade down from the Treasury to DIUS and DCSF, and from them to their subordinate agencies, and which govern the priorities and actions of all publicly-funded actors.
- Formal consultation exercises
- The routines of the government's spending round planning exercises

More generally, and probably most importantly, at least some elements of the narrative have formed part of the embedded expectations and worldview of the vast bulk of central government and agency staff. They have been part of the fabric of normative exchange within and between government bodies working in this area of policy and delivery. To think outside the central messages encoded in the narrative or to question its basic tenets is unusual, and the vast majority of civil servants and agency staff have given very little appearance of seeking to do this. Those who have failed to conform through acquiescence to the veracity of the narrative have risked being labelled, at best 'eccentric', and at worst as being in some way disloyal to ministers and to their colleagues.

The narrative and public debate

At one level there is active and vigorous public policy debate about education and training – via thinktanks, events and conferences sponsored by, for example, the Nuffield 14-19 Review, the Campaign for Learning, LSC and many others; plus numerous official consultations by LSC, QCA and DCSF, DIUS and the Cabinet Office. How can such a debate be reconciled with the monolithic, unitarist worldview outlined above, not least, as the narrative it supports has been designed to ensure closure of any substantive discussion about policy directions other than those already endorsed by central government?

The answer, put crudely, is threefold. First, unlike certain aspects of policy as it applies to schools and higher education, debates within the learning and skills sector take place more or less outside the spotlight of mainstream media attention. The national press and television news agenda does not normally encompass issues to do with vocational (or adult) learning. In part, this is because the media are generally concerned with the type of educational route with which its staff are most familiar, and through which the offspring of 'middle England' (a popular euphemism for the middle classes) pass. This means that areas such as further education, adults and young people following vocational courses and apprenticeship are not subject to

anything like the same level of scrutiny as school or university reforms. This relative absence of general media attention gives policy makers far greater freedom, and means that debates about non-A level, non-HE post-compulsory education and training rarely spill over from specialist ‘trade’ publications aimed at those working in the system into the national press. Out of the limelight, control of the policy agenda is far easier to maintain.

The second reason is that the majority of the debate is conducted within the terms established by the narrative and those who create it. The vast bulk of discussion concerns the best means to implement decisions about education and training already made by central government. It is normally about the ‘how’ of policy implementation, only infrequently about the ‘what’, and almost never about the underlying ‘why’. On those relatively rare occasions when dissenting opinions have been voiced, for example by individual researchers or trade unionists, they have had limited impact as those holding these views have normally possessed little in the way of a powerbase within the structures that formulate or even deliver policy. They have been the voice of the outsider.

Third, the process of debate and the views and ideas that it uncovers are often detached from any influence over the actual process of high-level policy formation. The formulation of education and training policy for the learning and skills sector until very recently has been incredibly centralised (see Keep, 2006b) and the fundamentals of policy have probably normally been dictated by a very small and very closed community of ministers, advisors, thinktank staff, management consultants and senior civil servants, numbering perhaps 50 souls. For three very interesting mapping exercises on who has wielded power (albeit as it applied to schools policy), see Passmore (2001), Slater (2005) and Ball (2008).

Only rarely does policy formation in the learning and skills sector move outside the closed circle. The absence of powerful elected local government or social partnership organisations with the clout given by an institutional framework wherein they are embedded, has meant that central government is firmly in charge, and able to set the form and agenda of policy.

Members of the charmed central government circle sometimes participate in the formal manifestations of public debate insofar as they deliver speeches at events, but the communication is unidirectional – there is no real engagement or discussion, not least because policy is already decided and not open for renegotiation. The

minister delivers a pre-prepared speech (normally written for him or her by civil servants), and may answer some questions from the audience. That is generally the extent of the debate. The minister generally does not stay for the whole event, or mingle in any unstructured way with delegates. The exception, in very recent times, has been John Denham's (the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills) willingness to engage in more open-ended discussions about the future of non-vocational adult learning.

As a result of this approach, much of the national debate has been:

- A form of organisational promotion (for whichever body is hosting the event).
- An opportunity to offer the form and semblance of dynamic leadership/activity by those at the centre of policy. The debate is a platform for their thoughts, presence and implicit power to command action.
- A means of enlisting support/approval for what has already been decided elsewhere.
- A transmission mechanism, whereby central government's priorities are cascaded down through the education and training system and messages about new priorities communicated to subordinate actors.
- A form of displacement activity.
- A safety valve for marginal dissent – an opportunity for letting off steam.
- A form of collective daydreaming, whereby those involved in the education and training system can fantasise about the way in which the latest reform/programme/initiative will bring about a solution to long-standing problems (the 'this time it will be different' daydream).

Ultimately, debate has often been a ritualistic activity that central government has undertaken or engaged with in order to clothe a centralised decision making system in some shreds of wider participation. It has, for other stakeholders, formed a collective fiction that they sustain because the alternative would be to admit their own powerlessness.

Mechanisms for protecting the narrative's integrity

The question of how the many players within the learning and skills sector interact with the narrative is one that would require another paper to deal with properly. All that is attempted here is to sketch in some of the broad general principles that have tended to govern this interaction and to offer the outline of an explanation as to why changing the shape and direction of the narrative has proved so hard.

The narrative has evolved in a manner that, in part by accident, in part by design, renders it highly resistant to any form of fundamental revision and thereby has helped ensure a strong degree of path dependency for the policies that have resulted. At one level, this is because it has been an expression and embodiment of a set of fundamental ideological choices by policy makers about how England can and should confront a range of economic and social challenges. It has represented a ‘gospel of vocationalism’ (Grubb, 2004; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004), wherein more schooling, training and skills can be deployed to tackle a huge range of social and economic ills without resort to other forms of intervention that are less acceptable within a neo-liberal paradigm (Keep, 2006b; Keep & Mayhew, forthcoming).

Because the shape of the narrative has been derived from fundamental ideological choices about what forms of state intervention are possible and acceptable, it is an extremely rigid and perhaps brittle construct – it is hard to effect significant change to any individual element without undermining the rationale for the whole edifice. A bit like an ice palace, the narrative might shatter or melt, but it cannot easily bend or adapt. For example, the moment that it is accepted that increases in the supply of skills are, on their own, insufficient to produce the desired effects, then attention has to shift to usage and that in turn means attention on (and intervention in) the workplace, which policy currently holds to be a sealed ‘black box’ (Keep, 2002). As English civil servants have repeatedly remarked to the author, government cannot be seen to be telling employers what to do about how they manage and deploy their staff. Again, if enhanced skills only deliver results as part of a wider economic development and business improvement strategy, then the government finds itself in the position of having to ‘pick winners’ and tell business what it ought to be doing to improve. As will be discussed in the concluding section, it appears that we may be reaching the point where precisely just such an admission is being wrung from government, with what long-term consequences for the narrative it is as yet unclear.

At another level, the narrative’s longevity of itself has invested it with considerable power. Indeed, its resonance has been reinforced by ceaseless repetition in a lengthy succession of policy documents (Mansfield, 2000), whereby the narrative has achieved a liturgical status as the vehicle for the recitation of time-hallowed and fundamental ‘truths’. As such, it has taken on the classic role of myth – it exists beyond mere fact and is accepted at a subconscious, often unreflexive level – so

commonplace a set of understandings as to be beyond the need for reflection or debate (Boje, Fedor and Rowland, 1982). What would there be to discuss?

A second reason is that there are considerable material consequences attendant on any substantial revision. In other words, those who have propagated the narrative probably stand to lose if it is revised. As argued above, the narrative has been developed and deployed in part as a means of securing additional resources – political capital and salience and public spending – for the central government department that has the chief remit in the area of skills (see Blunkett, 2001 as a prime example of the importance of education and training being used to try and secure resources within central government). Any change in the narrative that led to a downplaying of the centrality of skill supply and a shift towards other policy approaches, for example economic development policies or reform of employment relations, work organisation and job design, would mean less power and money for DCSF and DIUS and their empire of subordinate agencies. Self-interest is hence a major motivation for subordinate agencies in not disrupting the narrative.

As a result, those who believe in and benefit from the narrative in its current form have tried to ensure that external agents are not allowed to tinker with it. Even within central government access to opportunities to redefine or refine the narrative have been very limited in number and the identity of those who have had access to them subject to considerable scrutiny. Thus in undertaking a fundamental review of long-term skills policy (and hence the assumptions that underlie such policy) the deliberations of the Treasury-sponsored Leitch Review came under intense scrutiny from, and attempts to influence by, the DfES.

We also need to acknowledge the possibility that many policy makers have become so attached to the narrative (for both material and immaterial reasons) that efforts to disrupt or change it are subject to the occurrence of cognitive dissonance, or what Argyris (quoted in Crossman, 2003: 41) terms ‘defensive reasoning’ whereby facts and theories that cannot be assimilated into the received wisdom of the narrative or world view are either ignored or discarded (see also Festinger et al, 1964; Stronach & Morris, 1994; Lumby & Foskett, 2007). Those who research strategic decision making in the private sector term this phenomenon ‘bounded awareness’, wherein, ‘cognitive blinders prevent a person from seeing, seeking, using, or sharing highly relevant, easily accessible, and readily perceivable information during the decision-making process... Most executives are not aware of the specific ways in which their

awareness is limited' (Bazerman & Chugh, 2006: 90). One of the key elements of bounded awareness is a tendency not to seek data that might pose a counterfactual challenge to the received wisdom that the organisation and its decision makers already accept.

It is interesting to note that over the last two decades, by far the most serious attempt to review and alter the narrative came from a central government inquiry into skills mounted by the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU). This sought to transfer attention away from the supply of skills by the publicly-funded education and training system towards problems concerning low levels of demand for skills in the UK economy, poor usage of skills once created, and the need for public policy to give greater attention to the demand side. There is not space to discuss in detail how the guardians of the narrative responded to this challenge (for accounts see Coffield, 2002; Keep, 2002 & 2006b), but their main device was to graft the language of demand onto existing policy discourses, leaving the underlying fundamentals of policy unchanged. As the PIU had no direct control over policy – it was essentially an internal government 'think tank' – it proved relatively easy for policy departments with a heavy investment in the existing narrative to maintain the status quo.

Moreover, actors within central government have had at their disposal a range of sticks and carrots that could be deployed to reward or discipline those in subordinate agencies (such as the LSC) who are expected to repeat the mantras encoded in the narrative. In other words, the narrative does not necessarily need to rely on its own internal coherence or intellectual force to survive, there are more direct supporting mechanisms in place to both ensure its continuity and help enforce central government's will across the education and training system. There is not time to explore these in any detail here, but they include:

- Patronage of appointment and removal of those who disappoint or dissent (not least within the agency's senior management).
- The honours system offers important symbolic rewards for those who play the game and refrain from rocking the boat.
- The threat (and reality) of the disbandment of agencies on a regular basis helps prevent the emergence of organised interest representation to emerge. The history of sectoral bodies is a good example, with changes from Industry Training Board (ITB) to Non-Statutory Training Organisation (NSTO) to Industry Training Organisation (ITO) to National Training Organisation (NTO) to Sector Skills Council (SSC), and now with the 're-licensing' of SSCs ongoing as a means of reminding everyone

where funding for these bodies and control over their ultimate fate really lies (i.e. central government).

- Most importantly, control of funding. This extends beyond direct government agencies, such as the LSC, to cover what are nominally employer bodies, such as the SSCs, and to the trade union movement via government funding of Unionlearn. Recipients of government funding understand that there is an implicit deal, wherein biting the hand that feeds you (particularly if the biting takes place within a public forum) is unlikely to go unpunished.

Given that many aspects of the narrative are either a massive simplification of reality or at considerable variance with it, it might be expected that the interaction between those central government officials who are authors and guardians of the narrative and the day-to-day workings of the education and training system would throw up problems, and thereby tend to highlight discontinuities between the framework that has been constructed to explain the system's purposes and functioning and what actually happens in practice. In fact, this has rarely occurred. One of the functions of the battery of subordinate agencies and quangos managed by DCSF and DIUS is to insulate ministers (and to a lesser extent senior civil servants) from uncontrolled instances of contact with the actual functioning of the education and training system. The system is experienced second or third hand through the filter of intermediary bodies and layers of management. Dissenting voices are removed, messages from the front line are sanitised and success stories and 'killer facts' played up.

A good example has been the manner in which employers have hitherto been engaged with. To begin with, contact between employers and central government has been limited and weak (DfES, 2002). In addition, ministers and senior policy staff normally have only ever met a carefully selected band of employers who are education and training enthusiasts – those who sit on official task forces, working parties and conference platforms. They have been drawn mainly from large companies. Moreover, as the narrative has evolved it has tended to privilege the interests of employers over that of other actors (Leitch Review, 2006; DfES, 2007) and policy has offered the promise of more government subsidy directed at employers' training efforts, for example, through Train to Gain. In these circumstances, and for as long as the narrative refrained from placing any direct, enforceable burdens on them, employers have had every reason to go along with the story the government has seemed so intent upon telling.

A final potential source of disruption might be research and its findings. However, as indicated above, the narrative has dealt with research in ways that tend to neutralise its impact. Isolated pieces of data ('killer facts' as policy makers like to refer to them) have been deployed in support of particular assumptions or policies. As previously noted, the bulk of these have been derived from a relatively narrow spectrum of economics research (for example, rates of return analyses on particular forms or levels of qualification), or from forecasts of future skill demand. By contrast, findings from business literature, industrial relations and personnel management have tended to be ignored. Furthermore, the institutional mechanisms whereby research findings could be brought to bear on policy, or through which policy makers might be confronted with alternative explanatory frameworks, are almost totally absent. For instance, DCSF, DIUS and the LSC all lack an expert panel or research forum on skills that could allow a structured conduit between the worlds of research and policy. The only body that has ever maintained such an institution has been the SSDA (a tradition carried over into the new UKCES). As Grubb observes:

Policy is often driven by narratives, or widely-accepted 'stories' about why certain programs are worthwhile. The creation of such narratives typically takes a considerable period of time and many participants. Once widely accepted, policy narratives like the Education Gospel, or human capital, are resistant to change, and subtle empirical evidence – the results that research can generate – is not usually enough to modify or complicate a policy narrative. (Grubb, 2004: 61).

Counter Arguments

Earlier versions of this paper have been met with some accusations that it paints an overly deterministic and pessimistic picture of the English skills policy scene. These criticisms fall into two camps. The first points to the complexity of the New Labour political project and the need for nuance in describing and analysing its central components. In particular, some (Coffield et al, 2008; Hodgson, Spours & Steer, 2008) follow Hall (2003) in arguing that New Labour has been engaged in a subtle 'double-shuffle' process, the existence of which invalidates a simple reading of policy.

The second, and often allied criticism, suggests that whatever the form of national policy and the rhetoric that surrounds it, such policy and the institutional settlements and programmatic structures that it supports are subsequently subject to high levels of mediation and re-interpretation by subordinate delivery agencies,

practitioners and learners, and that this process in fact represents a potent form of covert divergence from, and resistance to, central policy diktats. In other words, in reality, power is more decentralised than the narrative's view of formal policies and structures might suggest because ultimately those who deliver policy get the final word on how it works in practice.

Within the confines of this paper, there are three relatively brief responses that can be made. The first is that, at least to some degree, they are justified and that in order to clarify exposition and stimulate debate, the arguments presented in this paper set to one side the many conflicts over policy that occur among the circle of senior policy makers at the heart of central government. The paper may also over-play the power of the centre to shape and ultimately dominate both the policy discourse and the power structures within the education and training system via the narrative.

Notwithstanding the above, the second counter-argument is to accept that subordinate agencies, their staff and those who work in education and training providers do indeed expend much time and energy in softening the edges of poorly-designed and centrally-dictated schemes and programmes, and in tailoring these to meet a series of complex realities of which their architects in DfES (now DCSF and DIUS) have remained blissfully unaware. Indeed, the success of the system in no small parts probably rests on the ability of the grassroots delivery system to quietly re-design and re-direct the detailed implementation of policy.

The critical problem with this line of argument is that, as suggested above, the narrative is focused on setting the broad ideological agenda and constructing the assumptive world within which practice takes place. In other words, it is primarily concerned with control of strategic policy (including how the education and training system should be configured), not with delivery, implementation or grassroots practice. There are other mechanisms (for example Ofsted inspections) to address these needs. Furthermore, there is a big difference between lower level policy staff and practitioners seeking to adjust policy implementation and practice at the margins, and their challenging the central conceptual tenets and power relationships that policy relies upon. At this level – active resistance rather than quiet and hidden minor subversion – the silence has been fairly deafening. Put briefly, in terms of openly dissenting voices from major stakeholders inside the education and training system, while there have been some attempts to dispute secondary elements of the narrative (particularly as they relate to the necessity for central control of the system), there has

been almost no overt challenge of any sort to the central elements of the ‘gospel of vocationalism’. The one major exception has been campaigning by various parties against the transfer of funds to support Train to Gain and the resultant damage to adult non-vocational learning, though even here the LSC and its Council members have remained publicly loyal to the government’s line.

As has already been hinted at, in part the reluctance of stakeholders within the education and training system, such as providers, represents a realisation of self-interest in that the narrative may incorporate some elements that are less than appealing to them, but at its core it provides the *raison d’être* for the allocation of enhanced levels of resourcing (money, staffing, student/trainee numbers, capital investment and political salience) for education and training from which they all benefit to some degree. As a result, insofar as there is contestation, it is very often over resource allocation between competing interests – for example, between FE colleges and private training providers. In a sense, contestability and marketisation, besides their supposed efficiency gains, also afford central policy makers the opportunities offered to any colonial administrator by classic ‘divide and rule’ tactics.

The third point that can be made is that Hall’s (2003) depiction of the New Labour project is not undisputed (see, for example, various contributors in Daniels and McIlroy, 2009). However, even if Hall’s analysis is accepted in full, neo-liberalism is a broad enough ideological stance to support a spectrum of interpretations and forms, and musings on the deployment of a ‘social democratic’ variant of neo-liberalism (or neo-liberalism with a smiley face, as this author would put it) are not inconsistent with this interpretation. The problem is that, as Hall admits, the dominant step in the double-shuffle (the two steps forward) is strongly neo-liberal in character and intent, and the social democratic component is the subordinate (the half-step back). As a result, what emerges from this ‘third way’ is inherently a variant of neo-liberalism and not any form of social democracy. Elements such as meaningful social partnership have remained wholly absent from New Labour’s education and training policy model (Keep, Lloyd & Payne, forthcoming).

It might also be noted that there is another, largely unacknowledged potential reason for strong policy continuity between Conservative and New Labour governments, and that is the underlying staffing of the detailed policy formation processes by a civil service that over time has become increasingly unable (even if it

were willing) to engage with, or conceive of, anything other than a broadly neo-liberal paradigm. It might be noted that May 2009 will witness the 30th anniversary of the arrival of neo-liberal government in the UK, and such an unbroken underlying ideological continuity has had a cumulative impact on the civil service, the vast bulk of whose members have now not worked under any government of a different ideological hue. Thus their assumptive world is often founded on neo-liberal principles, and the default position for policy formation tends to be the impossibility of anything that is not based on lines of policy development that have been established over the last three decades – hence the canonical status of the narrative discussed above.

One chink in the armour of contemporary English education and training policy might be taken to be the deployment of rhetoric around a ‘new localism’. While the new localism certainly exists as a vaguely specified concept or slogan, it is open to criticism on at least two fronts. First, it is hard to see many concrete signs of serious devolution of power (as opposed to operational responsibility) from central government to elected local government (see Payne’s (2009) discussion of the impending transfer of 14-19 funding to Local Authorities). Indeed, the general direction of travel under New Labour has been the creation of ever-more un-elected agencies and bodies whose activities are directed by central government departments. As a result, it is hard not to conclude that the democratic deficit has grown, not diminished.

In this regard, the proposed transition from the LSC to the new Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is illuminating. Although the LSC’s Chair and Council, at least in public, found themselves either seriously disinclined or incapable of challenging government over any major element of policy, none the less DIUS have chosen a new model of governance for post-19 funding that centres on a Next Steps agency that will have neither chair nor council. The SFA will in effect simply be the secretary of state’s ‘cat’s paw’ – a body without the semblance of independence, through which the structure and policies of the FE system can be altered at ministerial whim and without any serious debate involving other stakeholders and interests. It is not a development liable to engender optimism about a transition to a more open and devolved power structure in English education and training governance.

Second, the English state’s model of governance for education and training can perhaps best be judged in comparison to models found elsewhere. Such

comparisons are illuminating. When contrasted with the vast majority of other European countries, our system is exceedingly strongly centralised and un-devolved (Keep, 2006b). Even within the UK, the Scottish system offers an example of a far more balanced and dispersed dispensation of power, operating with far higher levels of trust than could be presently dreamed of in England.

The final point that needs to be made here is that the bulk of those who work inside the policy machinery of English education and training are every bit as much victims of the narrative's attempts to limit thought as are college principals, teachers, lecturers, trainers and the host of other practitioners whose working lives are driven by the priorities forged by state policy and its associated targets. One of the great strengths of the narrative (from its architects' point of view) is that it provides a mechanism for closing down internal debate and novel thinking within the policy process.

Last Thoughts

This paper has argued that the chief functions of the narrative have been threefold:

1. To freeze thinking and analysis at a particular stage of development – one that locks policies into a broadly neo-liberal paradigm wherein skills policy concentrates on the narrow goal of delivering a supply-side push.
2. To secure political attention and resources for education and training as an area of policy and activity.
3. To delineate how and in what directions policy can and cannot develop.

As a result, English skills policy formulation has taken place within a tightly defined and artificial set of theoretical boundaries that have defined what ideas are acceptable inside the policy world and hence can be discussed, and what are unacceptable and therefore cannot be discussed. In consequence, the skills debate has produced a self-replicating repetition of a narrow range of discourses and policy interventions, which have often been constructed with limited regard to any external reality.

A complex interaction between these elements has produced, over time, a system of central control by ministers and senior policy makers that mirrors the sentiments expressed in the quotation that starts this paper, and which has left subordinate bodies and agencies with a sharply circumscribed analytical and policy repertoire to draw upon. More of the same is all that it has been possible to conceive of. As a result, although the institutional forms have undergone constant change and 'reform', the underlying policy trajectory has remained unchanged and highly

resistant to substantive redefinition or re-focusing by those outside the sphere of central government.

The narrative, acting in combination with other elements of control outlined above, such as volume targets as the main performance indicator, patronage and the designing out of autonomous power bases for interest groups that might challenge central government's viewpoint, has been highly effective in supporting a very centralised education and training system. Real debate about education and training policy has been closely circumscribed, and subordinate agencies have been left with a role that allows them to deliver policy but not influence its primary formation to any great degree.

Re-writing the Story - Is Change Possible?

As argued above, the narrative has been closely guarded by its creators and sponsors and disruption or amendment of any of its major elements has to date proved impossible, even to forces within central government (for example, the Cabinet office PIU project on workforce development). Yet, as things have stood until very recently, only those inside central government have possessed the ultimate power to alter the foundations or structure of the narrative. Fundamental change in the key elements of the narrative by other actors has been impossible because the institutional arrangements that might offer the leverage to enable this to happen have been wholly lacking in England. Given this history, progress often appeared a remote possibility, and it was hard to see who or what might act as a catalyst for a re-think by national policy makers.

A number of current, impending or possible events now however give rise to the potential for a substantive amendment of the narrative. These disrupting factors are reviewed below.

First, the election of any form of neo-conservative, right of centre administration along US lines might, via notions of a smaller state, undermine the rationale for the complex and very expensive panoply of bodies that state management, funding and design of skills supply current requires. The impending squeeze on public spending will give impetus to such developments who ever gains power at the next UK general election. A right-of-centre government might also advocate the creation of a low tax, 'can-do' economy, wherein citizens, freed from the burden of an over-large and expensive state can invest their additional disposable income (created

through tax cuts) on education and training in order to better themselves and their children, thereby revolutionising economic performance and social mobility (for a blueprint of this model from a UK think tank, see Bosanquet et al, 2008).

Such an approach would sweep away some elements of the current model, but simply heighten the importance of others. To governments of the right as well as to those of the ‘centre left/right’ education and skills provide too tempting a policy lever for giving the appearance of tackling economic problems and social inequalities to be completely discarded. Moreover, any further drift towards core neo-liberal values makes government still less keen to engage with any of the issues or alternative policy avenues that might deliver economic and social policy goals – redistributive taxation, issues of class, short-termism and the ‘financialisation’ of the UK economy and labour market regulation and employee relations issues. The seeming ideological neutrality of skills as a point for intervention in the economic and social spheres and its apparent capacity to deliver win/win/win outcomes (for the individual, employers and the state/society) means that the skills narrative’s selling power might actually increase under a more overt neo-liberal political settlement, although the policy approaches and instruments it supported would undoubtedly shift somewhat.

A second means by which the narrative might be disrupted is via analytical and policy divergence between the UK’s four national governments. If a new narrative is forged that starts from different assumptions and leads to a new repertoire of policies that in turn generates superior outcomes to those associated with the English skills supply-led story, English policy makers might come under some pressure to take account of this success. Obviously there are already many examples of other OECD countries that have developed (or are developing) different types of skills policies based on a somewhat divergently-founded framing of the policy problem, for example the Nordic states, Australia (with its skill ecosystems projects – see Alcorso & Windor, 2008) and New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 2008).

Until now it has always been relatively easy for English policy makers to deny the relevance of experience in these countries, on the grounds that they are far away and their societal and economic makeup is radically different from our own – the Nordic states are always treated as some form of aberration, not least as they offend the dominant Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism and how it and its attached national units of production should function. However, with the arrival of the Scottish Skills Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007a) and the Scottish Economic Strategy (2007b) a

very different form of skills/education and training policy framing has emerged inside the UK, and one that is generating a search for interventions that tackle the demand for, and usage of skill, as well as its enhanced supply. Scotland is part of the UK and shares many characteristics with its English neighbour. Moreover, a UK-wide policy concept transmission mechanism has sprung into being in the shape of the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (UKCES), and UKCES has already adopted skill demand and usage as major themes of their work (UKCES, 2008). In support of this agenda, the UKCES's research programme will be examining skill usage.

This is an interesting and potentially important development. UKCES was a body designed by the Leitch Review team, with at least some suspicion that one of the intended functions of the new organisation was to 'de-devolve' skills policy and re-assert the primacy of the English policy viewpoint across the whole UK. In the event, whatever the original intentions, the UKCES seems to be working in the opposite direction – acting as a vehicle for promoting and exploring policy concepts generated outwith England. Both individual Commissioners and senior Commission staff appear intent upon testing (and perhaps amending) some key elements of the extant English policy narrative from inside the machinery of government. UKCES reports directly to ministers and appears to be wielding a surprisingly strong influence, at least in these its early days.

The birth of UKCES has also coincided with the unintended conjunction of two other factors – the Leitch targets and the collapse of the popular model of finance-driven economic growth and prosperity. As argued above, the Leitch targets are both a result, and concrete embodiment, of the traditional English skills policy narrative. They have been resoundingly and repeatedly endorsed by the government (and by many other actors). Their achievement was (and is) predicated upon both the willingness of employers and individuals to make a massive, step change in their investment in skills at Levels 3 and 4; and more broadly upon a vision of economic policy and competitiveness that saw the country being powered towards a knowledge-driven economy by a fast-growing and world-class finance and business services sector and by a consumer boom fuelled by credit and the housing market.

Unfortunately, for government, the bulk of the Leitch targets were looking unattainable even before the impact of the recession (House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2009b). More broadly, we appear to be witnessing the terminal implosion of major elements of New Labour's economic

policy, with the prime minister announcing that ‘laissez-faire has had its day’ (Watt & Wintour, 2009), whatever that might be taken to mean, and the emergence of fresh approaches to government intervention, and new models of economic development and business regulation policy, though the form and substance of such change remains profoundly unclear, probably even to those who are promoting it (see Mandelson, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; DBERR, 2009).

Given these developments, some cracks are starting to appear in the narrative. In a speech to the CBI, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills made the following observations in terms of the Leitch targets:

The question though, that I want to ask today is whether all this will be enough. If we pursue these policies with sufficient determination, will they produce what our economy really needs: the right people, in the right place, and when they are needed? My answer has to be: ‘Not necessarily’. There are a number of key factors driving our skills system, which are not yet properly addressed in our skills policies:

1. Whether we understand properly what drives employer spending on skills and whether our current framework will maximise it.
2. Whether a system that responds to the demands of individual employers will produce the critical mass of learners with the right skills.
3. Whether government and business should not work more effectively together in areas of strategic skill needs.
4. Whether national and local government themselves could not do more to boost the demand for, and supply of, skilled labour. (Denham, 2008: 2, numbering added)

As noted above, the narrative is a brittle one – it is hard to make major adjustments to any single element without running the risk of reducing the entire edifice to rubble.

However, a great deal of time, energy, effort, political and reputational capital and emotional commitment has been invested in constructing the narrative, and it would be extremely unwise to assume that it will be easily abandoned by many of its architects and believers. How hard such change would be is neatly illustrated by the words of Estelle Morris, an ex-Secretary of State for Education, who observed:

So, the sheet set before ministers on their first day is not a clean one. Often missing from policy announcements is a robust analysis of previous efforts. What did the policies achieve?... Which should be continued and which dropped? Yet imagine the headlines if this were to happen: ‘Millions of pounds wasted’, ‘Minister undermines predecessor’, ‘School policies in turmoil’. The need to evaluate interventions collides with the political imperative not to admit to mistakes. (Morris, 2008: 3).

If this barrier applies to policies, how much more does it impact on the ability to admit that the fundamental analyses and explanatory narrative that has underpinned policy for the last two to three decades is fatally flawed?

The road goes ever on.....

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professors Lorna Unwin and Michael Young, both of the Institute of Education, London University, for their extremely helpful and thoughtful comments on a much earlier draft (which was presented at the 2006 EGOS Colloquium in Bergen) and Professor Gareth Rees and other participants in the first seminar of the ESRC TLRP 'New directions in learning and skills in England, Scotland and Wales' project at which a later version was presented. As ever, any failures of omission, design, expression, thought or fact remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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