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In education, as in other areas of public policy, an assessment of the three Blair governments is now under way. During this period, the college sector was abolished and a learning and skills system created. In higher education (HE), tuition fees were introduced and a change to variable fees brought the Government close to defeat. In the shallower waters of higher education in further education (HE in FE), what might be said about policy activity over the last 10 years?

The beginning and end of this period were marked by some significant developments. Soon after coming into office, the new Government accepted the Dearing inquiry recommendations (NCIHE 1997), not just on charging fees but inviting further education colleges (FECs) to take a leading role in renewed expansion. To support a special mission in sub-degree HE, colleges were to be funded directly, their franchise and higher degree ambitions curbed, and existing higher diplomas and certificates were to take the new demand expected at these levels.

A decade later, indirect funding was the preferred model, partnerships with universities and employers were semi-compulsory, and a new Foundation degree qualification had been invented to stimulate demand for work-focused higher education. And there was the prospect of some colleges awarding their own Foundation degrees. A lot else happened in between, or did it?

Furtherhigher education

As a first stab at comprehending this episode, I want to offer three ways of capturing and conceptualising policy change in relation to English furtherhigher education. The elision of further and higher is deliberate. It is meant to help us analyse changes that operate across sector boundaries yet find their main policy expression in separate decision-making, funding and quality regimes.

My three rough and ready ways of looking at 10 years of policy production are not mutually exclusive. Nor are they exhaustive. They also rest on two assumptions, both of which are open to challenge. The first is that we can actually recognise a body of policy addressed to HE in the learning and skills sector. If we can, then a second assumption is that the central authorities for HE, not those for FE, exercise ownership and control of such policy.

Dearing and the current Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) review of HE in FECs are evidence for this leading role, albeit in dialogue with the relevant section of Government and its agencies. By asking the review to come up with a consistent and coherent policy, there is more than a hint that what passed before fell short of this description.

However, there is recent evidence of a claim on this territory from other parts of the system. First there was a strategy on higher education produced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC 2006) and then a White Paper on further education (DfES 2006a) that required HEFCE to address a number of priorities. More than that, we now have a Further Education and Training Bill (DfES 2006b) that will give colleges the authority to award a Foundation degree qualification, something previously only available to HE establishments holding general degree-awarding powers.

Policy in part

Let me use the search for consistent and coherent policy to introduce one kind of lens to view the decade of Dearing, Blunkett (2000), Foster (2005) and Leitch (2006). This is to focus on those elements of policy specifically addressed to HE in the colleges, including that branded 'high skills'. When we look at the policy traffic entering, parking, crashing and leaving this zone is it blur or bricolage? Is it all chaos, confusion and contradiction? Or is it progress in assembling policy from the bits and pieces lying around?

For me, what is interesting to observe is the shift from a policy of no policy before the Dearing intervention to one that highlighted the difficulties involved in squaring policy for two sectors and the competing interests within and between them. Take, for example, the career and content of the Dearing and Kennedy (FEFC 1997) reports. Dearing surprised everybody by pronouncing on FE. Kennedy on the other hand was innocent of HE in the college sector and had nothing to say about it. They rarely met and hardly spoke to each other. When they reported, the new Blair Government gave them equal attention but separate treatment in a green paper devoted to lifelong learning (DfEE 1998a, 1998b).

Although new agencies arrive and cross-phase policies can emerge, notably for education between 14 and 19, sector mentalities survive. Nor is ignorance or ambivalence about HE in FE confined to one sector. Nor are sector organisations without their own disagreements about what to do and say about this territory. For HEFCE to fund small amounts of HE in a large number of colleges is not just an issue of organisational capacity. And for the Quality Assurance Agency, at the beginning of its career, to profile the low ratings achieved by a small minority of colleges was not just about the proper conduct of quality assurance.

Of course, it might all have been different if demand for sub-degree education had been strong and if colleges and many universities were not competing at the same qualification levels for the same pool of students. But England is not Scotland, no matter how much the Dearing inquiry borrowed from north of the border. Despite assorted government statements reinforcing the college role in English higher education, the pursuit of collaboration and competition has created complex, conflicting and unstable conditions for confident policy development. This is not where you go to do heroic policy.

Strategy at large

Another way to make sense of the last 10 years is to invert the telescope. Rather than engage with the twists and turns, the equivocations and silences, and the presumptions and prescriptions of micro policy, we might range larger and wider. Rather than alight on policy as such, we should consider system change and reform across the whole of education and the other major public services. The coupling of strategies to increase economic and global competitiveness on the one side and strategies to provide for social protection, inclusion and mobility on the other is a trademark of Blair Governments, with neo-liberal principles driving much of this effort.

In the world of post-secondary education and training, the pursuit of these strategies is intended to promote accessibility, efficiency and responsiveness. A qualification like the Foundation degree is intended to widen and increase participation in HE as well as align with the needs of employers and the economy. It must function both as a stand-alone vocational qualification and as a transfer qualification offering smooth progression to the bachelors degree.

The local accessibility of FE, along with its flexibility and long history of working with employers, make it a suitable setting for delivery of the Foundation degree. All this appealed to a Government wanting to diversify the mission, costs and funding of colleges and universities. Whether pointed at HE or FE, a common goal of such strategies has been expansion through differentiation. And government ministers have been nothing if not determined in their use of the market and central intervention to achieve these goals.

Alongside fee reform and research selectivity, differentiation in HE brought deregulation of university and qualification titles. For the first time, a qualification below the Bachelor level is titled a degree. Differentiation in FE stemmed from an

insistence that general FE colleges identify one or more areas of vocational specialisation for which they could be recognised as centres of excellence. Now, care of a White Paper on further education, colleges will be home to centres for higher education excellence as well.

Should we now expect to see sharper forms of differentiation within college-based HE, as funding routes and degree-awarding powers do their policy work?

Here, as elsewhere, government policy is to achieve dynamic differentiation without formal stratification.

Policy as experiment

Thirdly, the Blair years can be regarded as a period of major experiment in English higher education: a radical, ambitious and far from finished policy project in which further education is centrally implicated. The purpose of this experiment is to break the traditional pattern of demand for English undergraduate education (DfES 2003). As illustrated by the recent and rapid shift to mass levels of participation, that pattern was based on recruitment to the full-time honours degree at establishments of HE.

Some of the elements in this experiment have been mentioned already, especially the creation of a new flagship qualification, the Foundation degree. Other key policy instruments are the 50 per cent participation target adopted at the start of the second Blair Government and the high-level skills strategy that came to prominence during the third administration. Each is a radical departure. Together they aim at growth in provision and participation at levels below the bachelors degree. Although colleges, universities and

employers are all party to this experiment, it is dual-sector settings and cross-sector partnerships that will carry the new wave of expansion.

Reaching or approaching the 50 per cent target by the year 2010 means changing the supply of HE as well as reaching and attracting new constituencies of students. As the first new qualification in English higher education for 30 years, the Foundation degree is expected to replace existing qualifications at this level and be the catalyst for vocational HE in new modes, settings and styles. Targeted at those already in employment as well as those holding vocational qualifications, the new degree is to benefit from the vocational progression promoted by lifelong learning networks.

Ahead of demographic downturn in the school-leaver population, the Foundation degree is charged to stimulate demand for short-cycle HE and, with numbers on Bachelor degrees being held steady, to steer demand into programmes designed and delivered in association with employers. In the latest phase of this experiment, incentives are offered to develop a richer and yet more diverse range of provision, including that wholly or partly provided and funded by employers.

One of the merits of viewing HE in FE as a site for policy experiment is that questions are triggered about what came before; and what comparisons can be made with policy movements and debates elsewhere. Is part of the explanation for the contemporary policy push to be found in the way that the English moved to mass higher education? Is this why there is so much residual anxiety about a college role in HE? And, to borrow a question routinely asked of American community colleges, is this role about diversion as much as democratisation? The Foundation degree as class reproduction and cultural transformation?

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