

Reflecting From the Front Line: Research on Lifelong Learning and Policies for Well-Being

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The paper provides an account of the interface between policy and research on lifelong learning as experienced in a recent UK Foresight exercise. In 2008, the UK Government Office for Science published a lengthy report on what it called mental capital and well-being. Commissioned as part of the Foresight process – intended to help government anticipate emerging and urgent future developments - the report outlined a number of interventions that could be taken in the short to medium term in order to improve mental capital and well-being over the longer term; the relevant departments are, under the Foresight process, required to report on what they have done to implement these changes, some of which concerned adult learning.

Policy as a focus for research in lifelong learning

Policy making looms large in educational research, including research into adult learning. While this sub-area is characterised a wide variety of approaches, two clearly dominate. First, there is an enormous body of critical analysis, often informed by theories of political power. Usually, these are high-level theories of power, which operate at a high level of generality, and in many cases the evidence base is confined to published policy texts (Field 2002). These studies have helped theorise lifelong learning policy, relating it to wider developments in contemporary capitalism, but do not set out to explore the policy making process as such. Second are evaluation studies focussing on the impact of particular policy measures. It is not easy to detect patterns in this large and varied body of work, but many are commissioned evaluations while others are conducted by people who are themselves responsible for the initiative being investigated. Many are atheoretical and do not seek to establish relationships to wider developments. Again, they do not set out to investigate policy making as such.

Evidence based analyses of the policy making process in lifelong learning are rare. Coffield and colleagues at the London Institute of Education have been researching the UK's learning and skills policy framework as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Coffield, Edward, Finlay and Hodgson 2007)). The London study was concerned with policy making in work-related learning; I am not aware of comparable studies of policy making in other areas of lifelong learning.

Policy and research under New Labour

In 2000, the secretary of state responsible for higher education in England and science strategy for the UK devoted a major speech to the relationship between policy and research in Britain. David Blunkett argued that there was an unhelpful gap between the research community and the policy community, and as a result policy was not as effective as it might be. In calling for a closer relationship, he argued for greater use of evidence on the part of the policy community, while urging researchers to pay greater attention to fundamental public problems and communicate their findings with greater clarity (Blunkett 2000).

Blunkett stated these proposals bluntly – or, as some saw it, offensively. In other respects, his stance was broadly in line with New Labour thinking on the role of research in shaping policy. The Blair government came to power in 1997 with a number of well-defined proposals for policy interventions in a number of areas that were drawn from dialogue with researchers. Senior Labour Party politicians had urged the previous administration to involve researchers in hand-over initiatives, such as the Dearing inquiry into higher education which spanned the change of government. The civil service recruited a number of researchers who had worked for New Labour think tanks such as DEMOS and the Institute for Public Policy Research, one of whom has written tellingly of this experience (Mulgan 2006).

At the same time, New Labour was investing heavily in research. Research funding was increased in real terms, particularly in higher education, but this came with conditions. As in other areas of public policy, the government presented itself as requiring publicly funded bodies to modernise their management and delivery in exchange for increased resources. New Labour's strategy for science and innovation rested on the argument that increased resources were required in order for the UK to maintain economic competitiveness, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and effective public services, and this in turn implied that researchers should pay more attention to these major public goals (H M Treasury 2004). In response, the UK research councils adopted policies requiring grant holders to engage with 'end users' in developing proposals and disseminating their findings. The higher education funding councils and the national higher education lobby were also at pains to demonstrate that they supported knowledge transfer and public understanding of science.

Educational research was an early and continuing beneficiary of increasing public investment. In England, the Department for Education and Skills provided substantial levels of funding to launch three major research centres,

specialising respectively in adult basic skills, the economics of education, and the wider benefits of education. In addition, the English higher education funding council allocated an initial sum of £10 millions to the Economic and Social Research Council to support a Teaching and Learning Research Programme; the Scottish and Welsh administrations, initially distancing themselves from TLRP, were subsequently persuaded to add their financial support. Independently, the Scottish higher education funding council and Scottish Government had launched an Applied Education Research Scheme with the goal of improving research capacity in Scotland.

These developments came with a clear expectation that researchers would identify and engage with a range of non-academic groups and populations who would benefit from the research, and would therefore have a stake in shaping its focus and execution. Typically, educational researchers 'engaged' with non-academic stakeholders in ways that contained and limited their role, for example by inviting selected and known individuals to 'represent' their sector or interest group on a committee that might have an advisory role, but had little real power. There was also more commitment to engagement at the dissemination end of the process than at the design, data collection and analysis stages of research. This was so even in sub-areas like adult learning, where researchers had a track record of espoused belief in participatory approaches to research that were congruent with the wider values of their field. Nevertheless, these programmes did produce some genuine public partnerships around strong social science research into education, and in some cases they fostered reasonably serious dialogue with the policy community, as well as with some practitioners.

For many of us, this represented a welcome break with the previous period. Three prominent left of centre sociologists wrote of "the emergence of a renewed belief in the power of the social sciences to inform policy after a period in which faith in social development was placed in the hands of the 'free market' and its theorists" (Lauder, Brown and Halsey 2004, 4).

The Foresight project

In October 2008, the Foresight Unit produced a lengthy and detailed report on *Mental Capital and Wellbeing* (Foresight 2008). It made several recommendations on adult learning, for instance in relation to training (where it voiced scepticism over the failure of voluntarism in the UK) and to the role of general learning for older adults (which it saw as valuable in slowing cognitive decline and promoting contributions to the wider community).

Foresight is part of the Government Office for Science, which is itself part of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, and its role is to take a long term, evidence-based view of long term policy issues across the whole of government. It sees itself as engaging less in predicting the future than in anticipating potential risks and opportunities, and developing strategies that will help policy-makers identify interventions that will have a long term future impact (see www.foresight.gov.uk). Recent reports have covered such topics as tackling obesities, flooding and coastal defences, and infectious diseases. As well as reviewing evidence and making proposals, Foresight exercises

require a formal response by the government departments affected by their recommendations, and there is a longer term follow-up of these official responses.

Clearly, these exercises assume a particular paradigm of scientific (including social scientific) knowledge. They tend to be highly problem-focused, and to take a cross-disciplinary approach to the problem under consideration. Much of the scientific work is undertaken by researchers, most of whom work for universities, who undertake the tasks of conducting reviews of existing research, and peer-reviewing interim reports. The researchers were overseen by a Science Co-ordination Team of five experts, who each took responsibility for one particular sub area, known as a 'challenge'. My responsibility was for Challenge B, Learning through Life; others took on responsibility for Mental Capital through Life, Mental Health, Well-being and Work, and Learning Difficulties. Myself aside, the SCT members comprised psychologists, social psychologists and neuroscientists; from time to time we were also able to call on direct contributions from economists and others. We were accountable to two other bodies: an expert advisory group, comprising specialist researchers from universities, government departments and the third sector; and a high level stakeholder group (HLSG), comprising senior civil servants from government departments and senior staff from major third sector interests who represented the interests of groups such as older people, people with learning difficulties and adult learners. HLSG was chaired by a 'champion' minister. The five challenges, and the membership of the two committees, were agreed before the SCT was formed.

The report itself was the product of over two years' work. As well as the SCT, about 400 other researchers were involved as authors of a series of 'science reviews', which summarised existing research; as managers of the science reviews, a role taken in Challenge B by Leon Feinstein and Jon Vorhaus from the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre; as peer reviewers for the papers that came out of the process; and, along with other experts from the field of practice, as participants in consultative seminars, which were particularly important in testing out potential recommendations. The recommendations were seen by the relevant government departments, on the understanding that there would be 'no surprises' on either side. Following publication, each department is required to respond to all recommendations that fall within its remit, and there is a formal process of follow-up over the next twelve months.

One further feature of the process concerned the role of the media. The Foresight team hired media specialists to place stories in the specialist media, and to produce press releases and hold a press conference. SCT members were sent on a short media training course. The New Economics Foundation was asked to produce the well-being equivalent of five fruit and vegetables a day, with an eye on potential headlines (one of the five being to learn something new every day). While this ran counter to the occupational caution of the civil servants, who showed some nervousness about the pitfalls, this publicity represented both an attempt to engage with a wider audience about the research, and an opportunity to build up some momentum behind the

recommendations. The report was widely discussed in the education press, as well as in the media more generally, with much coverage focussing on the 'five-a-day' story, on the costs of mental ill-health, or on the neurological bases of some common mental disorders and learning disabilities.

Reflecting on experience

A number of lifelong learning researchers have engaged with policy makers in Britain and elsewhere over the last decade. This paper offers one account – inevitably partial – of one particular experience. My conclusions are firstly with respect to the particular experience of working with the Foresight Unit, and secondly with respect to the more general role of working with policy makers.

The Foresight process itself is a significant one. It has changed significantly since it was first devised under the Conservatives in the early 1990s, and reflects a rationalistic model of evidence based policy development (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007). Second, it reflects a broadly consensual model of policy development, which seeks to engage a range of stakeholders in dialogue along the way, in the hope of reaching agreement on the nature of the key problems and opportunities, as well as securing consent to the interventions being proposed. Third, it rests on a view of knowledge that some will see as positivist, with a broad conception of science (including social science) as a continuum, consisting of various disciplines that share a respect for evidence, for the procedures used to produce evidence, and for the use of logic in the analysis of evidence. Fourth, selecting researchers to serve as experts is also a process of excluding others. Fifth, the whole process involved compromises: between the civil servants and politicians, civil servants and researchers, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and so on. Sixth, there was a tendency for economics to hold the trump cards. Indeed, the very language of 'mental capital' could be seen as expressing the mastery of the dismal science. Certainly, whatever the science reviews told us, each intervention had to show some prospect of an economic pay off.

Staffed by permanent civil servants, the Unit conducts much of its work in partnership with researchers, most of whom work in universities. The Unit's staff are themselves highly qualified, and scientists hold no particular fear for them. This did not entirely preclude clashes between the cultures. One of our science review authors decided that his work had been sidelined by civil servants; while I saw this as involving minor changes, the largest of which was a reference to a DIUS report published after his review had been completed, the author saw this as evidence that policy makers ignore research that does not suit their purposes (Gorard 2008a; Gorard 2008b). And as well as clashes, there were also constraints. SCT members had to accept the broad parameters of existing policy. In practice, they had no problem in agreeing that securing the well-being of the nation and improving its mental capital were reasonable policy goals. Beyond that, our role was that of telling government that if these were their goals, then this was what the science had to say about how they might be achieved.

So much for the Foresight exercise. It is also possible to add a few more general comments about the uneasy relationship between policy and

research. First, and for obvious reasons, it is usually regarded as important to ask what impact such exercises have on policy. Usually, the conclusion is that researchers' influence is at best somewhat limited. While several of our key recommendations have featured in *The Learning Revolution* (DIUS 2009), and the Department of Work and Pensions is drafting a new strategy for older adults, perhaps we were simply swimming with the current when we drafted them. Policy makers and researchers inhabit different institutional structures with very different cultures, and their normative frameworks do not easily mesh with one another (Coffield 2002). Not the least of the problems is the difficulty researchers experience in 'explaining the implications of research findings in ways that would enable policy-makers to revise existing policies or devise new ones' (Coffield 2002, 486), rather than pointing to the need for more research, or claiming that their research shows that the world is very complicated.

Second, the institutional complexities are often not initially obvious to a naïve researcher stumbling into the corridors of power. There can be specific and short term disruptions to the initial, agreed expectations; usually, these emerge as a result of unanticipated changes to the policy environment, which then lead to new demands. There can also be significant institutional disruption. In our case, the Foresight Unit was moved from the Department of Trade and Industry into the newly created DIUS; the chief scientist who had approved the project retired and was replaced; the sponsoring minister moved on and was replaced. So some arguments had to be repeated and purposes explained at quite a late stage in the process. However, there are far more considerable barriers to policy change than are long term and structural in nature (including institutional structures), as well as those posed by policy-makers' adherence to particular policy models, and it is probably unrealistic to expect researchers to make a significant impact on these through their involvement in one particular exercise.

Third, it may be a cliché to say that research is not neutral, but it is nonetheless true that there are processes of selection and in/exclusion at work. The New Labour government has been particularly enthusiastic about the prospects of evidence-based policy, and a number of academic researchers have engaged with policy makers in different areas of lifelong learning. This paper is informed partly by the author's experience of this process, both as an 'insider' who helped to co-ordinate the exercise and as one of a number of academic researchers who has acted as a policy adviser in the UK and elsewhere. This raises questions about who is invited to advise policy makers, why particular categories of researcher – including many academics - are regarded by policy makers as particularly valuable advisers, and what types of research are valued for policy purposes.

Fourth, mental capital and well-being are in key respects typical of the challenges facing contemporary policy makers. They involve potentially spiralling costs, such as the expense of increasingly sophisticated treatment; the cost-benefits analyses are complex, and often involve difficult long term calculations that are invisible (or ignored) to most individuals; and above all they require government to mobilise citizens so that they act and behave in

particular ways (Edwards 2002). The role of the state is then to steer, rather than to direct (Pierre 2000).

Last, some strong critical voices seek to challenge policy makers' assumptions from outside, rather than attempting to influence policy by engaging with it. This tradition continues to flourish, as can be seen in work influenced by feminism, queer theory, post-structuralism and post-colonial theory. However, while previous critical policy studies sought to engage with wider social movements outside the academy (notably the labour movement), contemporary critique has taken a more theoretical and even abstract turn. Much of it, moreover, is sharply negative in tone, implying that the task of the researcher is less to speak truth to power than to refuse power altogether.

This begs the question of where, in that case, radical change might come from. It is most unlikely that collaboration between researchers and policy makers will produce deep-rooted shifts in the balance of power and resources in lifelong learning, or in any other area. But those who advocate radical change as the goal surely have a responsibility to explain firstly what radical change might consist of, and secondly to resolve the problem of agency. Who is going to push such a radical approach on the agenda? In the absence of any easily identifiable and major radical social forces, are the inevitable trade-offs of policy development worth the effort that researchers put in to them?

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