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Orr, Kevin

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An ecology of performativity: the gap between policy and practice in the English Further Education Sector

New Labour's unachievable policies

New Labour, elected in 1997, identified Further Education (FE) as the means to deliver two central policies in England: social justice through widening participation in education and enhancing national economic competitiveness through improving the workforce's skills. Therefore, the government has increasingly scrutinised and controlled colleges and FE teachers, who now must annually carry out thirty hours of continuing professional development (CPD) in order to maintain their licence to practice.

However, FE cannot accomplish the government's principle policy aims because the causal link between education, social justice and economic growth is unfounded, despite the notion's hegemony. Reporting on a recent major research project into education, globalisation and the knowledge economy, Brown *et al* (2008: 17) found that, "While the skills of the workforce remain important, they are not a source of decisive competitive advantage."

Moreover, they found that the expansion of access to Higher Education (HE) in the UK "has failed to narrow income inequalities even amongst university graduates". So, FE is subject to even greater control and accountability, such as compulsory CPD, to achieve policies that cannot be achieved.

This gap between intention and implementation primarily explains the quantity of policy in FE as one initiative demands another to achieve what the former failed to.



Social Justice through widening participation in education

Whatever else you could say about Labour's educational policies there is certainly no shortage of them. (Ball 2008: 86)

An avalanche of policies

Policy has been laid on policy, and for New Labour that has meant organisation laid upon organisation. So, CPD in FE over the past decade has been under the direction of the Department for Education and Employment which was replaced by the Department for Education and Skills, later split in two and replaced by the Department for Innovation, Skills and Universities and the Department for Children, Families and Schools. In addition, the Further Education Funding Council, replaced by the Learning and Skills Council which currently funds FE, have both been significant; as is Lifelong Learning UK, the body currently responsible for FE in England. The Quality Improvement Agency, now replaced by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service have also both had a role in implementing CPD policy. Besides these is the nominally independent professional body for teaching staff in FE, the Institute for Learning (IfL), whose website (IfL 2008) helpfully contains 250 acronyms used in the sector. Note, though, that IfL "do not expect [this list] to be comprehensive". Little wonder then, that one of the government's "top seven corporate risks" is:

Sector instability and Reform Overload in FE – that the key delivery partners become distracted from delivering "business as usual" due to uncertainty over the future organisational shape of the sector, or as a result of the sheer scale of change

(DIUS 2008: 6)

Such legislative complexity itself becomes an important factor in the implementation of any policy initiative. As a coping strategy FE teachers and managers have become adept at meeting targets, even when those targets represent little change in practice. The CPD initiative exemplifies this.



Enhance the skills of the workforce to cope with globalisation.

An ecology of performativity

Data from 21 colleges of FE demonstrates that the new requirement has little altered patterns of engagement in CPD. However, respondents from all but two of the organisations could describe the systems in place to achieve the government's targets by recording the thirty hours of CPD and membership of IfL. One college had a "master spreadsheet"; others used databases; and others had "frameworks" in place. What respondents described were mechanisms to ensure compliance could be verified systematically and quantitatively, even where there had been little new engagement in CPD. This is not deception; the targets have been achieved. Indeed, college managers have become used to creating systems which accurately "evidence" achievement, on which their funding depends and these systems have grown in symbiosis with government reforms to form an ecology of performativity.

There is a democratic deficit created by the unequal relationship between the government's agencies who fund and run FE on one side, and those working in colleges on the other which means that the government will be told the truth; targets have been achieved; but not the whole truth; those targets do not reflect changed practice. Thus the gap between policy and practice maintains.

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