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Lifelong Learning Policies in England

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Introduction: Historical background

It has been argued that different strands of lifelong learning have been present in England for many years, in such guises as Liberal Education, Adult Education, Continuing Education, Continuing Vocational Education and Continuing Professional Development (Kogan, 2000). However, it is also widely perceived that recent policy has focused more specifically on lifelong learning, with the creation of a wide range of new laws, bodies and initiatives, and that the term itself has become more commonplace in official discourses (Field, 2000b). There has been discussion surrounding the conception, implementation and success (or otherwise) of such policies, but before addressing such issues it will be useful to provide a historical background to the development of lifelong learning in England.

In the last 30 or 40 years, a range of social and economic issues has contributed towards various governments attempting to enhance workforce skills in the face of an increasingly globalised economy, leading many to conclude that there has been a long established vocational emphasis of lifelong learning policy (Evans 2003). Developments have been numerous, with policy generally being 'sign posted' by official reports (Kogan 2000). For instance, the Russell Report of 1973 provides illustration of tensions between vocational and more liberal attitudes. It argued the case for the establishment of a Developmental Council for Adult Continuing Education, which was subsequently rejected by the then Conservative Government. However, the Labour Government that followed drew upon some of the report's recommendations when they established the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE) in 1977. During this period, the Manpower Services Commission was also established, which focused on increasing the skills base for economic reasons. This is significant as it was entirely controlled by the government, therefore signalling an important development in removing powers from local authorities as being responsible for post-compulsory education provision (Evans 2003)

Latterly, much of the debate about higher education has been framed by demographic and economic imperatives. During the 1980s there was an influx of school leavers and primarily as a consequence, there was expansion of higher education, with a largely narrow focus on full-time provision for young people. This has been perceived by many as coming at the expense of developing provision for part-time or adult learners. Economic recession and a re-structuring of global markets also began to have an influence on government thinking regarding education.

1990s Onwards

During the 1990s some significant reports were published, including the Dearing Report on Higher Education, the Kennedy Report, and the report of the Fryer committee. Largely informed by these, the Green and White Papers, The Learning Age and Learning to Succeed, were published towards the end of the 1990s under the New Labour Government. There were also significant changes in the nature of higher education in

England during this period. Largely since the 1960s, the main way of studying for an undergraduate degree has been the full-time three year continuous course (Kogan, 2000). In recent years there have been a range of changes regarding curriculum design and the onset of semesterisation, credit exchange and recognition of prior experiential learning. The stated aim underlying much of this was to increase the level of flexibility for students in higher education. It has been noted that a necessary condition for lifelong learning to prosper is the moving away from a linear, tight framework, and that the above changes in higher education will be beneficial in making lifelong learning a reality (Kogan, 2000).

1. Theoretical Perspectives

Lifelong learning research in England is a sizable and multifaceted field, with multi-disciplinary contributions ranging from sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics and more. It is however possible to identify a number of influential conceptual approaches, whilst recognising that in practice they may be interrelated. Field and Leicester (2000) highlight four such themes, namely, political, where citizenship is encouraged through education; social, focused on emphasising wider participation; vocational, where a key concern is maintaining economic competitiveness and prosperity; and liberal, in which the importance of personal development and choice is central.

Perhaps the most fundamental tension that has existed is that between the 'liberal' and 'vocational' models. Although vocational approaches are a long established tradition in England, more latterly the concept has become closely connected with changing economic and labour imperatives associated with late-modernity, technological change and the 'knowledge society' (Murphy, 2000). Liberal perspectives emphasise the personal development and emancipatory potential of learning, or of learning for learning's sake (Williamson, 1998). From this perspective, the individual's role as a citizen and need to understand the social world in which they reside is key. It is often asserted that as the demands of the economy have become more reliant on a knowledge-based workforce, so has the accumulation of knowledge been more closely tied to education, thus the vocational model (many have argued) has come to dominate (Jarvis, 2001).

Further to these general observations, a number of theoretical perspectives have been influential. John Field (2003) has written on the changing nature of governance and state provision, and how this has increasingly led to emphasis being placed upon the increased personal responsibility of citizens. Within the context of globalisation and technological developments, the idea of human capital and the primacy of knowledge are constantly emphasised (Field, 2002). A related explanation of such concepts is provided by Colin Griffin, who has posited that lifelong learning policy should be viewed within the context of wider processes of welfare reform and the diminishing of the welfare state (Griffin, 1999). There has been a shift from education towards learning, where the learner is encouraged to be an active consumer, and the state becomes more concerned with enabling individuals towards this end as opposed to being a provider of social welfare (Griffin, 1999).

Richard Edwards (2002) has talked of how lifelong learning can be seen within the wider context of debates surrounding governmentality, in which a movement in the modes of governing away from collective interests and responsibilities, towards market principles and individualism has been witnessed. Individuals are encouraged to moderate their own behaviour in a reflexive sense and to become more flexible and enterprising. Edwards (2002) posits that the danger of such an approach is that it promotes differentiation, where rhetorics of 'choice' inevitably favour those with higher levels of cultural capital.

A post-modern contribution has been provided by (among others) Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997). They posit that accounts viewing shifts from education to learning, or the increased diversity of learning sites and demands for great professional competence in an entirely critical way, are somewhat misplaced (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). Those

concerned with adult education should embrace such changes and appreciate the importance of partial perspectives, as opposed to striving for all-embracing, liberating ideologies (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). There is recognition that the boundaries defining adult education have altered, and that demands for increased professionalism and accountability, or learners' desires to maximise their potential in the marketplace, should not be viewed as an attack on the profession. Rather, changes in education should be viewed as a response to fundamentally altered economic, technological, cultural and social circumstances, and should be accepted a part of the post-modern reality (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

2. Influence of Conceptualisations and Drivers on LLL Policy and Practice

As Kogan (2000) notes, there is a sense in which understandings of lifelong learning in England have suffered from 'prolific definition'. Simultaneously, lifelong learning has been promoted as a model for changing individuals and society, as a way of increasing economic competitiveness and of enhancing personal development, and as a means to address social exclusion (Kogan, 2000).

Many official policy papers emphasise all of these potential benefits, but criticism persists that economic imperatives, and human capital perspectives, have been afforded the greatest importance (Taylor, 2005). Some commentators contend that rhetoric of wider benefits of lifelong learning has not been born out in the detail of policy, and that conflicts between different areas of policy can, in effect, make the initial intentions of policy remote. For instance, Coffield (2000) has highlighted how the forewords to the White and Green Papers of 1998, and 1999 emphasise the wider contribution education can make to society, but that policy detail places greater emphasis on addressing the concerns of business and the economy. Coffield (2000) draws attention to the then education Secretary, David Blunkett, who, when launching the 1999 White Paper, stated that modernising skills and learning for the economic challenges of the next century was the government's principal aim.

That said, it is clear in recent policy documents that there is recognition of the potential wider benefits of lifelong learning. The 1998 Green Paper states "there are many people for whom learning has opened up, for the first time in their lives, the chance to explore art, music, literature, film, and the theatre, or to become creative themselves" (DfEE, 1998, intro. paragraph 10). Latterly, it was recognised in the Skills White Paper of 2003 that there is an interrelationship between vocational learning and broader, liberal education and unified approach was advocated (DfES, 2003). Also, there is much emphasis on promoting the 'active citizen', often tied into community development in official discourses. The 1998 Green Paper outlined a desire to create a unified society, assist in the creation of personal independence, generate social cohesion, and foster a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity (DfEE, 1998). In addition, initiatives such as the Union Learning Fund and Neighbourhood Renewal Initiatives represent an attempt to promote lifelong learning as a way of tackling social exclusion, a key theme in New Labour discourse of the late 1990s.

3. Understandings and Operationalisations

Higher Education

For Taylor (2005), HE has in many ways remained quite separate from other parts of the lifelong learning sector, but has been a key element in providing for those involved in post compulsory education, especially since its expansion from the 1980s onwards. Taylor contends that approximately 35 per cent of people in HE are part-time, and that more than 40 per cent are mature students. England has 78 universities and 34 other HE institutions, with some of these labelled “new universities”; in that they were previously polytechnics, or HE colleges, which became universities in 1992. The newer universities have had higher proportions of mature students and vocational courses, but there has been a diminution of this in recent years.

The importance of HE as a provider of lifelong learning has been further exacerbated by the introduction of foundation degrees, and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships. The central innovation of foundation degrees is to involve employers in their design and delivery, and consequently that they equip people with the relevant knowledge and skills for business. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships aim to ensure the Knowledge Base Partner's work has a greater relevance for business, to enhance competitiveness of the Company Partner, and to increase the career prospects of graduates. As such, they represent an attempt to promote an interface between the formal education system and business.

Further Education

Both vocational and general education for post-16 learners are provided in FE Colleges in England. The Foster Report of 2005 asserted that FE colleges should focus on employability and economically valuable skills (Foster, 2005). However, the report further contended that FE colleges had a key role to play in combating social exclusion and enhancing individual development, provoking debate on whether these two aims are both achievable. The report further criticised a lack of coherence in government strategy, and highlighted concerns as to whether the ever-widening range of government priorities could be met with current funding levels (Foster, 2005).

Non –Formal/Informal

The importance of learning outside of the formal education system was recognised in the 1998 Green Paper, with acceptance that learning encompasses everything from basic literacy to advanced scholarship. It was stated that the word ‘learning’ means everything

from formal study, to watching television and going on training courses. However, as Tight (1998) highlights, although there is broad acceptance of these principles in official rhetoric, much of the practical detail of policy emphasises formal and accredited forms of provision.

As Field (2000a) has outlined, some important traditional providers of non-formal education have ceased to have the influence they once did. For example, there has been a gradual reduction in membership of the Women's Institute (WI) and the Workers Educational Association (WEA) has been subject to 'steady professionalisation' (Field, 2000a). The re-structuring of the WEA further provides an example of how an organisation with origins close to the traditional labour movement has had to restructure and organise in ways that are more conducive towards current governmental ideologies. Such organisations emphasised self improvement on a basis of collective identity and acted as a force for social equality, and in comparison to the diffuse nature of much contemporary adult education, where unified in nature. This has been seen as a continuation of the trend towards individualisation, with subjects charged with being responsible for management of their own learning (Field, 2000a).

However, it is true to say that learning is conducted through a range of voluntary and community organisations in England, and that these offer a distinctive form of learning to that provided by statutory providers (Moreland, 1999). Added to this, Field (2000a) has shown how overall associated membership of voluntary organisation has increased in recent years. Given the link that exists between membership of such organisations and opportunities for informal learning, Field posits that such trends provide potential benefits for the prospect of informal learning. Furthermore, initiatives such as Learndirect and UK Online have been developed to allow for wider participation in learning, outside of the formal education system.

Professional learning and how it takes place within organisations is also important. Eraut (2004), whilst recognising that it is an under-researched area, posits that workplace learning provides an interesting area for discussion, arching as it does over a large range of structured environments, which are not structured for the primary purpose of education. Eraut (1994) has also shown how governments have tried to exert ideological control over what is considered to be worthy of professional learning. A potential danger here is what Field (2000a) has described as the 'growing polarisation' between companies that do, or do not, provide professional training, and that those which do, tend to be disproportionately populated by professional classes or managers.

System for Accreditation and Certification of Learning

The following discussion aims to outline the system for accreditation and certification of learning. There have been accreditation and certification systems established in all forms of adult education. Jarvis (2004) has argued that 'considerable emphasis is now being placed upon the competencies that are gained as a result of the learning', creating in its wake a large and complex system for accreditation and certification of learning (p. 237). For example, in relation to vocational training, the National Vocational Qualifications employs performance standards developed by Lead Industrial Bodies (Jarvis, 2004). One of the criticisms that Jarvis (2004) and others have made of the National Vocational

Qualifications system is the process of categorizing performance as a form of assessment and in general, the complexity surrounding the accreditation process.

In recent years, there have been attempts to provide accreditation for the overall system, specifically through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This is graded from Entry Level (basic) to Level 8 (professional). Each level of the NQF broadly relates to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), and thus there has been an attempt to standardise accreditation. For instance, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) stipulate that Level 4, (example of Certificate in Early Years Practice) is equivalent to Certificates of Higher Education. There are currently efforts underway to restructure the NQF and develop a new national framework for the accumulation and transfer of credits.

However, in many ways it is the case that there is an unregulated market of accreditation in England, with any private, voluntary or commercial organisation being able to offer its own certificates. This raises questions as to the validity and quality of such certification, as employers are not obliged to be accredited.

4. Key Concepts in LLL Policy

Whilst these individual concepts have been important within debates in England, they should not necessarily be viewed discretely. As Tight (1998) has identified, the idea of learning citizens, learning organisations and the learning society have, in a sense, become part of a ‘trinity’, which collectively add towards an overall philosophy of lifelong learning.

Learning citizens

There is a strong emphasis within much recent policy documentation on the importance of the learning citizen, or what is often called the ‘active citizen’. Much emphasis of this concept within official discourse centres around encouraging individuals to take charge of their own learning, with the goals of ensuring they become productive members of society, thus not burdening welfare systems. However, there is evidence of (at least in the early days of the New Labour government) a shift in what is meant by ‘active citizenship’, from the rhetoric of the previous Conservative administration, which had emphasised personal responsibility. For example, the Conservative Government of 1995 talked of the training of employees and of individuals being committing to learning, whereas the Labour Government of 1998 emphasised developing a ‘culture of learning’ (DfEE, 1995, DfEE, 1998). Whilst the central thrust of this discourse remained similar, there is a sense in which the Labour Government of the late 1990s attempted to promote more inclusively.

Knowledge society

Many of the espoused aspirations towards the creation of a knowledge society run parallel to wider government rhetorics (Edwards and Nicoll, 2001). The needs of a changing, global economy, closely linked to the growth of the internet and new technologies, is a central theme of New Labour ideology. As such, this concept features heavily within policy documents, and is often related to the goals of the Lisbon Agenda. The DTI is the government department most directly responsible, although often in partnership with others. For example, the conference ‘Knowledge 2000’ was a joint DTI/DfEE conference, at which Tony Blair stated, “I strongly believe that the knowledge economy is our best route for success and prosperity” (Blair, 2000).

Learning cities/regions

The concept of a learning region (also often referred to as a ‘learning community’) may not be a new one, but in recent years concrete initiatives have been put in place to encourage its development. It has been conceptualised as encouraging individuals, families and

employers to develop a culture of lifelong learning. For example, The Testbed Learning Community initiative was established by the 2003 White Paper. This is closely associated with tackling social disadvantage and inequality, and of helping communities to help themselves, and is therefore closely linked to the concept of the learning/active citizen.

Learning organisations

Much discussion of lifelong learning in England emphasises the importance of improving economic performance, and thus is closely tied to the role of employers (Keep, 2000). It is however important to note that the concept of a learning organisation is not confined to business, and may include non-profit and community organisations (NIACE, 2003a). However, the potential for learning organisations to be an 'exclusive' as oppose to 'inclusive' strategy should be highlighted, as some research has suggested that opportunities for learning vary between, and within, organisations, and that this often relates to the type of organisation, or skill levels of individuals within them (Tight, 1998). Therefore, caution must be taken to ensure than learning opportunities within organisations are not disproportionately restricted for those organisations focused on low cost sectors of the economy, or for low skilled workers.

5. Legislation and Policy

Key Legislative and Policy Measures on Lifelong Learning

In recent years, there have been a number of key legislative and policy measures on lifelong learning, which this section aims to discuss. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 established the HE Funding Councils, and the Learning and Skills Act of 2000 established the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), responsible for funding much FE and LEA activity in adult education. This represented a move away from the decentralised model that had been in place under the 76 Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and this in itself left the sector facing uncertainty (Coffield, 2000). The Higher Education Act 2004 represented a move towards a financing of the sector which included greater contributions from students.

In the English political system, Green and White Papers are key in flagging up government direction, and provide useful insight into official thinking. The Green and White Papers of 1998 and 1999 signalled the intensions of the New Labour Government towards lifelong learning, and have set the framework for much that has followed since. The 1998 paper announced Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), which were proposed to promote individual choice and a joint responsibility between employers, the individual and the state (Thursfield et al., 2002). There have been various arguments forwarded about ILAs, that they encouraged empowerment and equality, or that they placed too much responsibility on individuals who do not have the power to remove the structural obstructions to learning (Thursfield et al., 2002, Coffield, 1999). However, this initiative ended in 2001 due to fraudulent activity, and thus the principle was never adequately tested in practice. Arguments of its merits became lost within discussions on fraud, but it is worthy of note that it was a significant and important idea. The 1998 paper also introduced the Union Learning Fund, which aimed to develop workplace learning, but also to include trade unions in lifelong learning at a time when their influence within the Labour Party was being marginalised. Furthermore, the Skills White paper of 2003 included aims to provide the skills most needed for employers, and to direct funding towards providing free training to people studying towards a Level 2 qualification, and the 2005 White Paper developed many of these themes.

Other Policy Areas Driving Lifelong Learning Policy and Practice

Following the above discussion, this section briefly outlines the other areas of policy that have had or are having a driving influence on lifelong learning policy and practice. Community development was a theme that ran throughout the 1998 Green Paper, with recognition that learning can contribute to community cohesion and foster a sense of responsibility. This was said to be especially important given the rapid economic change

and industrial restructuring of recent years. In the 2005 White Paper, initiatives such as Jobcentre Plus were announced to strengthen the link between learning and social security provision. The aim of this is to offer help to those of a working age who are in receipt of welfare benefits, to enable them to move into the job market. Furthermore, the New Deal and other employment programmes have been designed to allow the long-term unemployed to gain skills relevant to employers.

Importance of EU Policy in Forming Lifelong Learning Policy

This section highlights the importance of EU policy in forming lifelong learning policy, and particularly the impact of the Lisbon strategy and goals. Virtually all recent official government documents allude to the need to adhere to the principles of the Lisbon strategy. For example, the 2003 White Paper claimed the government to be a 'strong supporter' of it, where it was said to underpin efforts to tackle skills shortages undermining economic performance. Furthermore, as a response to the European Council re-launch of the Lisbon Agenda in March 2005, the UK's first National Reform Programme was published on 13th October 2005. This report identifies key challenges facing the economy, including the areas of productivity growth and equal employment opportunities (HM Treasury 2005). The 2003 White Paper talks of a treasury assessment of the five economic tests for membership of the European single currency, and that a highly educated workforce with a culture of lifelong learning is more likely to adapt to economic change. The 1995 European Commission white paper was also important in setting the agenda in education and training in the context of increasing worldwide competition (CEC, 1995). It further attempted to incorporate issues of economic development with social cohesion, or the 'visionary and the practical' (Field, 2000a, p. 8).

Importance of International Organisations

In this section, the importance of other international organizations' policy is specifically explored. International bodies have historically been influential in stimulating debate. For example the 1972 United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report, Learning to Be, represented a key point in the development of thinking on lifelong learning, with recognition of the importance of learning in different settings, including formal and non-formal, and called for education to be democratized (Faure, 1972). Field (2000a) contends that whilst the stance of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was primarily focused on the human capital model, it nevertheless contained elements of social cohesion. As an example, in the OECD (1996) document Lifelong Learning for All, education is emphasized as means of generating the innovative, flexible and mobile lifelong learner. These views seem to promote a particular human capital framework with its stress on the economic rationale underlying lifelong learning. Yet at the same time, it is stressed that 'lifelong learning strategies can play an important role in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and marginalisation and so reinforce social cohesion' (Johnston, 1998, para. 4). In the 1990s, international organisations

(though more so the OECD) played a key role in driving the agenda, with England moving in a similar direction (Field, 2000a).

Policy Co-ordination and Government Agencies

The discussion that follows highlights how well policy is co-ordinated between various government agencies. This includes an identification of key government agencies that are involved, how problems of co-ordination are being addressed and the extent to which they are effective. The LSC, along with 47 local Learning and Skills Councils, is responsible for co-ordinating all publicly funded post-16 education and training, excluding higher education. There may however be some confusion between local LSCs and the national body regarding responsibilities (Taylor, 2005). As Taylor (2005) identifies, one consequence of the rapidly expanded range of agencies and initiatives, has been the coherency of the strategy being called into question. A range of government bodies have interest, including (among others), the Department for Education and Skills, the Department of Health, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Social Exclusion Unit and Regional Government. Each of these has, to an extent, their own agenda to pursue, and thus competing actors and institutions add to the problems of coherence, with the potential for competing bureaucratic powers to influence the direction of policy, possibly in unintended ways. An interesting example of this is the fact that the Treasury recently published a report on skills needs, an area in which they would traditionally not be seen as greatly influencing (Leitch, 2005).

Stakeholders, Social Partners and NGOs

There have been a number of key stakeholders, social partners and NGOs that have had an influential role in lifelong learning legislation and policy. The Skills Alliance is a government led social partnership aiming to bring organisations together to successfully deliver the skills strategy plan. Partners include the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). The NIACE is the national membership organisation for adult learning, the CBI represents employers, and the TUC are focused on workers rights, and as such the Skills Alliance represents a range of interests.

Various trade unions have Union Learning Representatives, providing general education for workers, whilst others have Lifelong Learning Representatives. A further initiative is the Union Learning Fund (ULF), established in 1998. Other voluntary organisations provide learning opportunities for people in specific social categories, such as those with learning difficulties and disabilities; and the National Federation of Women's Institutes. However, some organisations that might be termed as coming from the 'traditional' sector, such as the Workers Educational Organisation (WEA), may not have the influence they once did, or have been forced to re-structure to adhere to modern political imperatives.

6. Main Patterns of Provision and Participation

Despite a great deal of official rhetoric emphasising the importance of lifelong learning, there has been much criticism that in reality, priorities in education lie elsewhere. The recent NIACE report *Eight in Ten: Adult Learners in Education*, demonstrated that many providers of adult education in FE had experienced a significant reduction in their budgets in 2005-6 (NIACE, 2005c). This is largely attributed to the fact that there has been a large rise in the 16-18 age-group staying in education, as well as an increased commitment to expand sixth-form education, and that funding these areas is a higher political priority. The report further points to an emerging 'crisis' in the funding of adult education for those not involved in programmes contributing to either Skills for Life, or Level 2 targets (NIACE, 2005c). In addition, the governments commitment to achieve a 50 per cent participation rate in HE by 2010 focuses on the under 30s, and thus represents only a limited approach to the funding of lifelong learning.

Patterns of participation by gender

Survey data suggests women are less likely than men to have participated in post-compulsory education (Gorard et al, 2003, NIACE, 2005a, Fitzgerald et al., 2002). The most widely quoted survey in this area is the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS), the last of which was published in 2002. This showed that men were 5 per cent more likely to have participated in learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). There was variation across different types of learning, with women 6 per cent more likely to have engaged in non-vocational learning, but the overall trend is one of less female participation.

While more women are participating in post-compulsory education, there is significant variance in fields of study. In examining patterns of participation by gender in higher education for example, the engineering and technology fields are comprised of 85 per cent men, whereas women's rates of participation tend to be higher in healthcare, education and languages/humanities, according to the National Audit Office's (2002) analysis of data collected by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Other Initiatives

There are a vast number of government run, or funded, initiatives to promote lifelong learning across all sectors, and well as those administered by other stakeholders. The Skills for Life Strategy was launched in 2001 to improve national skills in numeracy and literacy. However, whilst attempting to promote *inclusiveness*, there is a danger that such initiatives might lead to *exclusiveness*, as opportunities may be limited for those not engaging in them. A key tactic to widen participation is ICT, with large-scale investment going into initiatives such as learndirect, the University for Industry and UK Online (Gorard

et al., 2003). Though the use of ICT has great potential in widening participation, current access is still stratified on economic, social and education factors (Gorard et al., 2003).

Patterns of Participation by Ethnicity, Social Exclusion, Age

There is evidence that a range of social characteristics are important determinants of adult participation in learning. For example, the 2002 NALS showed that whilst 88 per cent of professionals had participated in some form of learning, only 47 per cent of unskilled workers had (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). A key aim within governmental discourse on lifelong learning is increasing equality, and therefore such figures are a cause for concern. Similarly, the 2002 NALS indicates that participation in learning declines as age increases (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). Furthermore, white British people were shown to be 14 per cent more likely than British Asians to have participated in learning.

Extent and Reliability of Data Available

Participation rates may vary between different surveys, largely due to methodological differences (NIACE, 2003c). Some research suggests that although people may not perceive themselves as having participated in learning, when probed during interviews it transpires that in fact many had engaged in some form of what might be considered lifelong learning (Tough, 1976, Tight, 1998). This has clear implications for the accuracy of the picture portrayed in national surveys, as many of them are based upon self-reporting. However, such surveys are generally regarded as providing a good indicator of participation.

7. Broader Social Policy and Lifelong Learning

The following discussion is directed towards the extent to which issues of broader social policy have been incorporated into lifelong learning in England. This is explored specifically in relation a number of specific issues, including gender, social disadvantage and ethnicity.

Gender

The Women and Equality Unit promote equality in work, education and everyday life, with a recent report they sponsored showing that women without a qualification at level 2 are significantly less likely to be in employment (Tomlinson, 2005). The report also emphasised that delivery is needed on government rhetoric to ensure that for many women returning to work, training must be provided in such a way that they can fulfil caring responsibilities. The report recognised that some concrete initiatives are in place to enable women to receive training towards entering the labour market, for example, under the New Deal those claiming benefits (e.g. single mothers) may be entitled to receive free training (Tomlinson et al., 2005). Furthermore, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) produces research and publicity on the sex equality laws. It also runs campaigns to encourage women to take up traditionally male careers. However, patterns of participation for women remain lower than for that of men.

Social disadvantage

The key link between social disadvantage and lifelong learning in England is the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), which is the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The SEU work to combat cycles of poverty and to improve the chances of those who have low levels of skills and literacy. A recent SEU report outlined ways in which ICTs can be utilised to combat exclusion, most specifically in helping people to enter the labour market (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). The local Learning and Skills Councils "First Steps" budgets provide courses with the aim of encouraging socially excluded adults to enter learning. Although increasing participation in learning for socially disadvantaged groups has been a high profile policy recently, they are still considerably under representation compared with those from higher social-economic groups, calling into question issues of increasing as opposed to widening participation (Taylor, 2005).

Ethnicity

The Home Office strategy paper, *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society* contains strong focus on improving skills as a way of promoting social cohesion and of enhancing life chances (Home Office, 2005). It cites low skills as one reason why people from certain ethnic communities continue to suffer from disadvantage. Many initiatives are focused primarily on getting people into work, i.e. the Fair Cities initiative, a set of pilot partnerships between business, local government and the voluntary sector aiming to provide skills matching the needs of employers. The report shows that within the more general Skills for Life programme, 'key groups' (including ethnic minorities) are targeted. A further example is provided by the Black Training and Enterprise Group, who work to ensure that black communities receive equal opportunities to access employment training, and to facilitate individuals and groups to participate in economic regeneration of local communities through partnerships. However, given the under-representation of ethnic minorities in lifelong learning, and more generally of the link between ethnicity and social disadvantage, it is hard to view such initiatives as having a significant impact as yet. For ethnic minorities to be able to fully participate in lifelong learning, issues of labeling, better consultation with communities, better and more equitable staff recruitment, and more generally of assessing the specific needs of different learners must be addressed (Malach, 2000).

Age

In the near future there will not be enough young people entering the labour market to fill all new and replacement jobs, due to an ageing population (NIACE 2005b). However, as the campaign organisation, the Third Age Employment Network (TAEN) note, despite encouraging rhetoric, the majority of publicly funded skills training remains focused on those entering employment for the first time, largely the 16-25 year age group, thus they contend that the older people become, the less likely they are to be given training opportunities. In light of such criticisms, a Department of Work and Pensions led report included proposals to achieve a cultural change in attitudes towards age and ageing, and to remove age discrimination in employment and vocational training (DWP, 2005). However, as Field (2000a) notes, one must be careful to make a definite comparison between participation and advantage, as it may be the case that a positive consequence of ageing is the lessening of pressures to train or take exams.

8. Effectiveness of LLL Policies

It is important to highlight that different surveys may produce quite different results, due to differences in data collection, question interpretation or sampling. For example, NIACE surveys consistently find lower levels of participation than the NALS does (NIACE, 2003c). With that caveat, the most generally accepted measure of participation remains the NALS, and it is largely recognised that it provides a useful and broad definition of participation (NIACE, 1999).

Some evidence suggests progress has been made in increasing participation. The National Learning Target set in 1997, aiming to increase the proportion of learners (outside of continuous full-time education) from 74 per cent in 1997 to 76 per cent in 2002, has been met (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). Limited progress has been made in increasing accessibility to learning through the use of e-learning and related technologies. Learndirect has been key, where evidence shows that over 60 per cent of its users had not participated in any learning for three years prior to becoming involved, and that recognition of the service doubled between 2001 and 2002 to 60 per cent (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). Other initiatives have produced some success, for instance a National Audit Office report asserts that the Skills for Life programme has been successful in meeting its 2004 Public Service Agreement of increasing the skills of 750,000 people (National Audit Office, 2004).

However, significant variations remain between different social-groups in participation in learning, despite a key government aim being to introduce equality of opportunity. The 2002 NALS showed that participation levels are only 29 per cent for those with no qualifications, 52 per cent for those with basic skills difficulties and 67 per cent for adults living in the most deprived areas, compared with an overall national average of 76 per cent. Significantly, the NALS shows that since the series of surveys started in 1997, there has been little improvement reported in terms of obstacles to learning, and that there has even been a rise in respondents saying they are put off from entering learning by the rise in course fees (Fitzgerald et al., 2002).

Such barriers impact disproportionately on disadvantaged and marginalised groups, which is at odds with the stated aims of lifelong learning policy. A recent Treasury-sponsored interim report showed that only half of those people with no qualifications are in work compared to 90 per cent of adults with a degree, and that over 40 per cent of people with a disability have no qualifications (Leitch, 2005). The disproportionate distribution of skills has a negative impact on social mobility and equality of income, with social mobility having lessened in the last two decades, and the continuing skills gap has exacerbated social deprivation, poverty and poor health (Leitch, 2005). As Taylor (2005) asserts, a good deal of official discourse has stressed the transformative potential of lifelong learning, but little evidence exists to suggest this has been achieved, and this will be hard without fundamentally addressing structural inequality within society.

Objectives of International Lifelong Learning Policies

The re-launch by the European Council in March 2005 of the Lisbon Agenda, to focus more sharply on the priorities of jobs and growth, has been reflected in recent policy documents in England. The 2003 Skills White Paper emphasised the need to achieve Lisbon employment targets of an overall employment rate of 17 per cent by 2010, which is currently being met by the UK (European Commission, 2006). In addition, the UK National Reform Programme is responsible for detailing the challenges facing the economy in light of Lisbon. However the European Commission recognise that more needs to be done in terms of increasing skills in the workforce, and integrating more vulnerable groups into employment, including those with disabilities, people claiming incapacity benefit, and people living in areas of high social deprivation (European Commission, 2006) There has also been criticism regarding transport infrastructure.

Tensions Between Different Areas and Purposes of Policy

Despite a great deal of governmental discourse emphasising the importance of lifelong learning, a perception persists that there is a concentration on younger, or what Taylor (2005) calls 'standard full-time students'. Furthermore, future demographic changes specify that these changes will continue as current legislation compels colleges to give priority to young students, or as has been suggested to make adults "second-class students" (NIACE, 2005d). It is predicated that by 2009 as many as a million adults could be denied places at college due to large numbers of young people entering the sector (NIACE, 2005d). However, it is hard to assess if this apparent bias towards younger learners directly results from a lack of government determination, or is an unintended consequence of processes involving competing bureaucratic powers. Counter-intuitively however, it has been noted that long-term demographic trends and an ageing population make the case that improving the skills of older people is a necessity.

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GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE LLL 2010 RESEARCH PROJECT

In March 2000, the then 15 European leaders committed the European Union to become by 2010 “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment”. The Lisbon strategy, as it has come to be known, was a comprehensive but interdependent series of reforms, which has significant implications for a whole range of social policies, including policies for learning.

As part of the Lisbon strategy, the European Union has set the goal of raising the number of adults participating in lifelong learning to 12.5% by 2010. However, the proportion of learning adults in Europe differs widely across countries. The project "**Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: the contribution of the education system**", which forms part of the European Commission’s 6th Framework Research Program, is dedicated to identifying the reasons behind these differences and to studying the policies and practices related to adults’ participation in and access to lifelong learning in a number of European countries (see project's web-page <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee>).

The project involves researchers from thirteen countries and regions of Europe: Scotland, England, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Norway and Russia.

Project objectives

The objectives of this project are to:

- Show to what extent the countries differ in terms of patterns of lifelong learning.
- Reveal how these differences depend upon specific institutions and policies of each country.
- Assess the contribution of each country’s education system to the development of lifelong learning.
- Trace the ways institutional and policy prerequisites for lifelong learning have been developed in European countries.
- Identify the barriers to participation in lifelong learning in terms of policies, educational institutions, enterprises’ practices and potential learners’ motivation.
- Identify the best solutions and most successful practices in terms of participation in lifelong learning and to decide to what extent these would be applicable in other countries.
- Propose changes, which would enhance adult participation in lifelong learning and decrease social exclusion.

The LLL2010 research project extends over five years (commencing in September 2005), and these questions will be addressed in various ways through five sub-projects.

Potential impact

Project is expected to contribute both to competitiveness and cohesion of the EU by (a) developing and carrying out a joint agenda for a better understanding of the tensions between the knowledge-based society, lifelong learning and social inclusion in the context of enlargement of the EU and globalisation, (b) identification of best practices and suggestion of ways for implementation in order to reach the objectives for lifelong learning. The LLL2010 research project extends over five years (commencing in September 2005), and these questions will be addressed in various ways through five sub-projects.

The plan for disseminating the knowledge

The project aims to examine and report on national differences in approaching formal lifelong learning, but also to assist policymakers and practitioners in learning appropriate lessons from contrasting practice in other countries. Therefore, disseminating knowledge to relevant audiences – individuals, institutional actors and policymakers – is of the core issues within this project, and so dissemination activity will take place throughout the life of the project.

The preliminary results will be discussed in the workshops and conferences and introduced to national as well as international audiences. The results of the different research projects within LLL2010 will be presented in five comparative reports – one per subproject – and a final report, and two books will be published as a result of the project. A Conference “The Contribution of the Education System to Lifelong Learning”, scheduled in the end of the project, is aimed at discussing findings, conclusions and expert opinions on a European level.

To contribute to scientific discussion and enhance comparative studies in the field, further analysis of the results of the research will take place in articles published in specialized and interdisciplinary journals. As LLL2010 will undertake a number of original studies, the data, questionnaires and codebooks, and all the other relevant materials generated in the project will be made available to the scientific community at large.

Results achieved

The present summary covers the findings of the team during the first Sub-project, ‘Review of Literature and Policy Documents’; the full comparative report of the results of this Subproject will be made available on the project website by the end of 2007. The Subproject undertook comparative research on lifelong learning policies and practices. The aim was to review how lifelong learning is being conceptualised and put into operation across a range of countries in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe.

Purpose & Methodology of Sub-project 1

The purpose of the first Sub-project was to review how lifelong learning is being conceptualised and put into operation across a range of countries in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. The nature of the educational and lifelong learning regimes in each country, and how they are changing, were investigated. The report considers how far lifelong learning has entered the policy rhetoric in each country, and in what forms it has done so – in particular, how far it has been shaped by the European Union’s thinking, or by national or other influences. It considers how far rhetoric and practice diverge in each

country. It also considers how far actions of different areas of policy and government support lifelong learning, or hinder its development.

The Sub-project applied a comparative documentary analysis of approaches to lifelong learning, through analyzing national policy documents and addressing lifelong learning in participating countries.

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