Instinct or Reason: How education policy is made
and how we might make it better

Perspective report

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Contents

Acknowledgements

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The desk research that informs Section 3 was undertaken by Josephine Balfour, Elizabeth Thonemann, Katherine Richardson, and Catherine Ritman-Smith.

Foreword by Rt. Hon. Estelle Morris

Education and education policy have occupied me for most of my life. Education gives people the chance to develop their full potential and contribute to society – not just making a more efficient economy but improving relationships, creating art and pushing forward the boundaries of science. Different visions as well as contrasting options and budgets for our schools and colleges have been central to the recent General Election campaign.

Given how important education is, we know relatively little about how key policies are made. That is the focus of this report. CfBT asked a group of experienced researchers from the Learning and Skills Network to read the literature and talk to stakeholders to discover what has driven the big changes in education policy over the last 25 years. Is there a right way to make policy? Do politicians seek out or ignore the facts when making their choices? Are they well served or let down by civil servants, academics and think-tanks? In particular, how does educational research impact on policy making?

At its best, educational research is the genuine exploration of how current practice is working and what changes might re-shape ambitions and raise standards. High-quality research should provide a real resource for weighing competing views and political pressures and assessing results against cost. It should deploy imagination, evidence, impartiality and rationality to look at difficult and pressing problems.

Yet the relationship between education politics and education research has not been an easy one. This report addresses this issue. It suggests why this might be – sometimes because of the varying quality of the research and sometimes how it is valued. It looks at the influences on government – electoral pressure, international comparisons, cost, ideology, even the sheer pressure of events. It makes suggestions about how future governments, buffeted by those factors, might make better policy.

There is much to consider and discuss. You may not agree with all the points that the authors present. Nevertheless, I believe it is an important contribution to a debate that will become more pressing as international competitiveness grows, budget pressures increase and our ambitions for higher standards and greater opportunity for more people become more urgent. I hope you will enjoy reading the argument and join a vital debate about how best to raise skills and knowledge in our society.

Rt. Hon. Estelle Morris

Executive summary

1. This report investigates the factors that lie behind the formation of educational policy. It is based on discussions with an expert group, a desk-based literature review (including academic research and politicians' memoirs), interviews with stakeholders and an extended process of draft revision. The study looked at policy changes across a range of policy areas to help give a representative view.

2. The connection of policy to evidence is an area of increasing importance and interest. Perceptions of a disconnection are widely shared and were confirmed by our interviews and reading, despite the work of respected institutions aiming to bring research and practice closer together.

3. The report looks at and evaluates a number of possible drivers for policy. These include:

- Urgency: a sense that 'something must be done'
- Ideology – the values and beliefs of policy makers
- International exemplars
- Cost
- Electoral popularity
- Pressure groups
- Personal experience
- Research evidence

4. The literature review (section 3) indicates the vastness of the field. It recognises the overlap between education and broader public policy and particularly the recent influence of ideas of choice and competition. Common ground is found between education and other areas of government: a model of policy development is proposed (figure 4). Commentators agree that there has been an increase in the pace of policy change, perhaps associated with more rapid changes in political appointments and the growth of intermediary bodies. Changes in the various education sectors are discussed. Reaction to change is affected by the degree of consultation involved, taking the Education Reform Act as an instance.

5. Section 4 summarises the evidence of the interviewees. This was not always unanimous, and attention to the balance of interviewees is advised. Common themes were: the power of ideology; the increased influence of the Prime Minister; the changing face of advice and dissent within the Civil Service and beyond, and the need to work with the grain of government to retain influence; a possible increase in the politicisation of decisions; the replacement of pilots with pathfinders; the effects of increased information; the changing role of the Civil Service and the decline of major commissions as a source of policy advice; the effect of mobility within the Civil Service, which might lead to a loss of corporate memory.

6. The influence of the media was felt to have increased strikingly, demanding in its turn a more active handling of policy presentation from government. Media attention is felt to have influenced the development of some policy adversely. The important influence of ministerial career paths, which was mentioned in the literature, was also a recurrent theme from our interviewees. Despite a critical tone, the interviewees welcomed many of the improvements they felt had been delivered by the new public management.

The memoirs suggested that politicians took greater account of their instincts than of coherent analysis of evidence.

7.   Section 5 analyses what we can learn about educational policy from the memoirs of politicians. Those covered were the Prime Ministers – James Callaghan, Margaret Thatcher and John Major – and Secretaries of State – Gillian Shephard, Kenneth Baker, David Young and David Blunkett. The memoirs confirmed that the Ruskin speech of 1976 was a watershed in policy discourse – opening educational debate to non-specialists concerned with issues of quality and relevance. The memoirs suggested that politicians took greater account of their instincts than of coherent analysis of evidence. However, anecdotal evidence from visits or trusted practitioners was important, as was the support of think tanks and political advisers. Politicians of different parties and generations shared a distrust of some elements of the educational establishment – often with reason.

8.   Section 6 draws conclusions from the evidence:

(a)   There is evidence of a gap between evidence and policy making, which seems to get wider as governments stay in power. Administrations enter power with a commitment to 'what works' that seems to fade. The swift rejection of critical analyses or reports is an aspect of this which we regard as negative.

(b)   The media is very influential, and its attention to the short term and particular creates severe difficulties for policy making.

(c)   Improved information flows in the education service are to be welcomed, but they have a side effect – namely to increase the sense of urgency when something appears to be going awry. Information can tell politicians what is wrong, but is less useful in suggesting remedial action.

(d)   The assertion that in the past, education policy – especially regarding curriculum issues – was a 'secret garden' is true; probably unhelpful; and will not return. Nevertheless, attention needs to be given to the decline in the use of expertise and the politicisation of decisions on pedagogy.

(e)   Policy is changing more rapidly, and our contributors felt, often in a way that ignored the need for change to bed in. The rate of change varies between sectors.

(f)   There are costs to a system in which decisions become more political and are taken higher up. They can warp reaction to evidence, and create a presumption against policy adjustment.

(g)   Evaluations after implementation seem more common and better funded than research before reforms.

(h)   Though there have been benefits from the new systems of public management, some practices, in particular the unthinking use of business language, have been counterproductive.

9.   The report concludes with recommendations in section 7. These include:

(a)   The recommendation that the prime role of ministers is to bring their values to inform goals and ambitions, rather than tactics and methods, where expert analysis should play the larger role.

(b)   An expert commission, analogous to NICE in healthcare, should be established to create and interpret educational research, evidence and analysis. Such a body should advise institutional leaders as well as politicians and civil servants. Ministers would be encouraged to share their thinking when their analysis differs from that of the commission.

(c)   An office of Chief Officer – analogous to the Chief Scientific or Medical Officer – should be established. He or she should build strong links with the Select Committee system.

(d)   Evaluations should be independent, commissioned outside the Department and published. Research and evaluation should be brought together to share a budget.

(e)   Given the short career life of ministers and the limited life of governments on one hand, and the need for long-term implementation of educational reform on the other, there should be a search for consensus between political parties on non-controversial ground.

(f)   Attention should be given to the perception that little useful research is being generated for education policy makers. We recommend that a portion of the budget for educational research should be directed to topics which can be seen to relate closely to identified needs of the system.

(g)   Researchers should remain independent, but be given help to present their conclusions in a way that will give the best chance of calm consideration rather than rejection.

(h)   A prize should be established for well evidenced policy.

(i)   Better links should be built between practitioners, researchers, civil servants, politicians and quangos – represented in shared career paths.

(j)   International comparisons should be encouraged as part of a managed learning system.

1. Introduction

1.1   This report concerns the way educational policy is formed. This is a key issue for our society, for few political tasks are as important as ensuring effective education for our citizens. It is crucial for the achievement of two major goals of modern government – greater opportunity for individuals, and increased competitiveness for the economy. It is a major component of government spending and thus consumes a substantial part of our national wealth. It is no surprise, then, that in recent years educational policy and performance has taken an ever-larger part in political debate and public discussion. Historians looking at this growth contrast the position before the 1970s – where discussion of education policy and practice was a 'secret garden' to which only experts and academics were admitted – to the current situation where governments bring forward a succession of Education Bills, where employers and media comment on educational performance, and parties in opposition place new ideas for schools at the heart of their campaigning.

1.2   Yet despite the increased amount of activity in educational policy, there is a widely expressed concern that many of the changes are not backed by evidence. Our investigations looked at this assertion, and found a mixed picture. In some areas, policy has been soundly based on evidence of success, and confirmed by later evaluation. In a number of other areas, however, we have been shown examples of policies that are either flimsily evidenced, or actually counter-indicated. Worse, serious studies that cast doubt on the effectiveness of an aspect of policy are swiftly dismissed or attacked. Furthermore, many working in education feel policy is changing at a markedly increased pace. These views were shared by our interviewees, supported by our literature review and also revealed by other commentators. The issue is not confined to education. In January 2010, the Institute for Government's spoke critically of 'barmy ideas' and advocated wholesale reform in policy formation if government is to function properly after the general election.[1] In 2009, the Cabinet Office, less critical but equally concerned, published a report[2] that aimed at 'reconnecting policy making with front line professionals'.

1.3   The distance between evidence and educational policy and practice is not due to a lack of groups trying to bring them closer together: a number of organisations aim at improving policy formation and educational practice by sponsoring greater use of evidence. We mention the Coalition for Evidence Based Education later in our report. The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) is part of the Social Science Research Unit at the Institute of Education at the University of London: it aims at making reliable research findings accessible to those making policy, practice or personal decisions. The University of York and Johns Hopkins University support the Institute for Effective Education and its Best Evidence website.[3] Durham University also supports an Evidence Based Education resource.[4] CfBT chairs the group running the Education Evidence Portal[5] and publicises the outcomes of its own projects on the Evidence for Education website.[6] It is a website that also includes reports disseminating and summarising evidence from the wider research community for schools and colleges. The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) publishes a regular 'Inside Evidence' journal for practitioners. Other organisations contributing to this debate – such as the Assessment of Performance Unit and the Schools Council – have however disappeared.

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[1] Institute for Government (2010) *Shaping Up: A Whitehall for the Future* London
[2] National School of Government (2009) *Engagement and Aspiration: Reconnecting Policy Making with Front-Line Professionals* Cabinet Office
[3] http://www.bestevidence.org.uk/
[4] http://www.cemcentre.org
[5] www.eep.ac.uk
[6] http://www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation/

Estelle Morris told us that she looked at evidence much more often when she was a Minister than when she was a teacher.

1.4   The gap between evidence and practice is not just found in government. Institutions often make choices that lack strong evidential foundations. Estelle Morris told us that she looked at evidence much more often when she was a Minister than when she was a teacher. It is, however, the perceived disconnect at government level between policy formation and evidence of effectiveness which is the subject of our report. Our task was to explore whether the commonly held view was accurate, what might cause the disconnection, and what could be done about it. To explore the issue, we tried to find out what were the main motivations behind the choice of education policies since the 1976 Ruskin College speech by (then Prime Minister) James Callaghan.[7] It is a very wide field, within which we sought to focus on:

- Early years and pre-school initiatives
- Curriculum change in secondary, further and higher education
- Quality regimes
- Funding and fee policies in further and higher education
- Institutional autonomy for schools and colleges
- Wider and greater participation

This is a formidable list, offering us some assurance that our conclusions would not be distorted by undue concentration on a particular topic, sector or age group.

1.5   Work for this report started in the spring of 2009. Investigating the drivers behind policies in these areas is not a simple process, and we chose a multi-dimensional approach involving literature review, interviews with stakeholders, analysis of memoirs and broadcasts and contact with an expert group. The literature review allowed us to judge policy directions against best evidence. A series of interviews with politicians, civil servants, academics, think tanks, trade unionists and institutional managers took place in the autumn of 2009. Notes of each of these interviews were checked back and confirmed by the subjects. Given pressure of time – and the span of our study – we knew we would be unable to talk to all those at the top of the political pyramid, and so turned to memoirs which we found useful, intelligent and often surprisingly candid. The conclusions from our reading and interviews were discussed with an expert group, which met in January 2010; a draft of this report was circulated to this group before finalisation in February 2010.

1.6   This paper is not an academic monograph. Of course we have learned a great deal from the academic material and desk research, from interviews and memoirs, and we are confident that our judgements reflect the evidence that was placed before us. But we hope to have created a think piece rather than a thesis, a report that uses varied sources – some anecdotal – to argue for changes in public policy formation. We have not attributed points and quotations from our interviews to individuals for obvious reasons: however, all transcripts were checked with interviewees themselves and cross-checked within the research team.

1.7   A word about our title. In the 1930s Montagu Norman, the Governor of the Bank of England, refused to appear before a Parliamentary investigation, citing exhaustion as he took a two-month cruise around the Mediterranean. When he was finally forced to attend, and asked why he took decisions that deepened the UK's economic depression, he enigmatically tapped the side of his nose. Pressed further, he said: 'Reasons, Mr Chairman? Reasons? I don't have reasons, I have instincts', before adding: 'Well, if I had any reasons I have forgotten them'. It is the aim of this brief report to explore what prevents the greater use of reason, and perhaps reduce the role of unsupported instinct.

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[7] Callaghan, J. (1976) *Towards a National Debate (*speech at foundation stone laying at Ruskin College)*.* Full text accessible online at
http://education.guardian.co.uk/thegreatdebate/story/0,9860,574645,00.html

2. Driving policy

Something must be done

2.1 It may be useful to start this section with a statement of what this report is not about. We are not seeking to say whether policies are good or bad: our task is to understand the factors that shaped them. Discussions with our witnesses suggested a wide range of motives lying behind the consideration and adoption of educational policy. One factor that was frequently reported to us was a feeling that a particular problem needed urgent measures – that, to use a cliché, things had got to the stage where 'something must be done'. Examples included:

- worries about international competitiveness throughout our period – concerns which were long-standing and not confined to the UK

- the growth of youth unemployment – in the 1980s and, as those Not in Education, Employment or Training (or NEETs), in the 2000s

- concern about school standards following Ofsted reports and the evidence of examination league tables.

The last point suggests a link between the greater transparency now to be found in public services and the pressure to act. The sense of urgency to meet a pressing problem is an important dimension of policy formation, placing a topic firmly on the Ministerial agenda, and leading the media to demand responses. The Government must, in the words of one of our witnesses, 'be seen to be doing something'. It is not, however, by itself a factor in determining which policy to choose. For that we turn to the list below, which is not exhaustive, but includes the major drivers that were reported to us during our study.

Ideology

2.2 Ideas matter profoundly: 'indeed, the world is ruled by little else' as Keynes famously said. One would expect that the values and beliefs of those making important choices would play a substantial role in the choice of policies. The phrase 'purely ideological' is used as an expression of distaste, yet value judgement must lie at the heart of the political process. It is only ideology, after all, that prefers equal opportunity to discrimination, or property rights to theft. Politicians are often passionate about quality and opportunity in education.

2.3 The importance of marketisation as the preferred mode of administration of public services was often mentioned as the key ideological change over the period of our investigation. The view that services are best provided in an environment where sellers and buyers can interact freely, rather than have them provided on a planned basis by a government agency was accompanied by a number of changes, such as measures to increase the independence of schools and colleges, drawing private funders into educational provision and services, involving employers and private industry in training, and permitting greater choice by parents and students as to which institution to support. The emphasis on individual choice was supported by greater transparency: it is extraordinary to remember how recently parents were unable to look at inspection reports for the schools their children attended and the furore from schools that accompanied the proposal to publish their examination results. The view that societies benefit from efficient and self-regulating markets, and good government involves deregulation, lower taxes, balanced budgets, and privatisation (referred to broadly as the 'Washington consensus') reflected two powerful factors:

A particular feature here is the creation of executive agencies, at arm's length from government, to manage the delivery of public services.

- the failure of alternatives. Communism had collapsed as centrally managed economies failed to deliver the efficiency and growth secured in the West. Keynesian dirigisme seemed unable to cope with the combination of inflation and recession in the 1970s. State-run enterprises were inflexible and often loss-making

- an academic change of climate, with economic theory suggesting that markets allocated resources with greatest efficiency. At the same time, economists such as Buchanan and Olson subjected government activity to the same critical analysis as had previously been given to free markets: this area of work became known as 'public choice theory'.[8]

2.4   The associated trend has been termed the New Public Management, which places stress on 'delivery' via performance monitoring, strategic planning and targets across the public sector. This was accompanied by a new language – delivery, mission, clients, markets. We look at this in greater detail in section 3. A particular feature here is the creation of executive agencies, at arm's length from government, to manage the delivery of public services. The two influences come together in an agenda of 'competition, contestability, personalisation, top-down performance management and consumer choice and voice'.[9]

International trends

2.5   The importance of ideology cannot be separated from international trends. More than one of our interviewees used the term 'zeitgeist' to express the idea that international links, often unconsciously, spread common values and ideologies. In any case, politicians and academics would be keen to hear from those in other countries facing similar issues: strong links were established between the UK and the USA by both the Thatcher and Blair administrations. One example of research from elsewhere directly affecting policy, though also fitting in with the prevailing ideology, was Allan Odden's American work[10] which became the basis of the White Paper which brought in performance related pay. Anecdotal learning from overseas trips was also reported – we mention later how Lord Young brought back an enthusiasm for vocational schools from an Israel trip.[11] International transfer is sometimes a matter of learning about approaches that seem able to meet common problems. Interestingly, we were told that policy borrowing from the USA is strong not just because of a common language but because it reflects a richer pool of education research – a sound body of evidence identifying effective and ineffective approaches to increase the impact of teaching. Systematic reviews of evidence have highlighted findings that can be trusted because they are based on well-conducted trials with control groups – and a high proportion of trials are undertaken in the USA where they are used much more frequently in education than they are here.[12]

2.6   International policy exchange has enormous attraction, widening perspectives and asking new questions. For all their cultural differences, advanced economies often share the same educational issues – themes like raising school standards, helping the disadvantaged and staying competitive recurred in international discussions. This makes it all the more disappointing that we couldn't find evidence from our interviews or reading of a coherent system of analysing contrasting overseas approaches to select the most promising. Learning from international examples seems

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[8] Buchanan, J. M. and Tulloch, G. (1972) *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of a Constitutional Democracy* (Univ of Michigan Press); Olson, M. (1965) *Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard University Press)

[9] Pring, R. *et al* ed. (2009) *Education for All: The Future of Education and Training for 14–19 Year Olds* (Nuffield 14–19 Study Final Report) Routledge

[10] Odden, A. and Kelley, C. (2002) *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do: New and Smarter Compensation Strategies to Improve Schools* (2nd ed.) Corwin Press.

[11] Young, D. (1990) *The Enterprise Years: A Businessman in the Cabinet* (Headline) p.23

[12] See as an example the recent DfES funded survey of the *Effect of Block Scheduling on Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools: A systematic review of evidence* – Kelly Dickson, Karen Bird, Mark Newman, Naira Kalra (EPPI-Centre Feb 2010) – very worthwhile work, based almost entirely on American evidence.

an attractive approach to policy choice, but it needs to be undertaken whilst bearing in mind a number of issues:

- Evidence can be transient – what was attractive in one year can prove less so later. US policy makers and commentators were very interested in Japanese practice in the 70s and 80s, an enthusiasm which lapsed as Japanese economic growth stalled.

- Many components of success can be culturally specific and so not transfer easily between countries. For example, the American PICs (Private Industry Councils) that were used as a model for England's Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (in Scotland Local Enterprise Companies) leaned on a distinctly American tradition of enterprise and business/community involvement.[13] They came up against a different British business culture, and staff who, we were told, 'remained civil servants with a continued culture offering little innovation or excitement'. Equally, the success of Finnish schools is attributed to the excellence of teaching (due to its prestige as a profession in that country) rather than any institutional autonomy.[14]

  One difference that needs attention when making international comparisons is the way that statistics are collected. Rigorous comparisons of achievement in science, maths and English certainly do exist.[15] Beyond that, however, comparison is less easy. A wide statistical tolerance is advised before judging from international comparisons whether the UK is ahead of, or behind, comparator nations.[16] Take the commonly expressed concern about the number of qualified technicians in relation to industrial competitors. The judgement here is dependent on how we assess the level of vocational qualifications in other countries, and whether those countries have a system that requires certification. Many UK citizens have the vocational skills to hold down level 2 and 3 jobs, but are uncertified in a way that would not be possible in, for example, Germany. The widespread comparisons of the proportion of young people staying on at 17 and 18 are affected by the inclusion of countries where 'redoublage' – the practice of obliging students to stay on and even drop down a year until they have passed certain tests – is a feature of the system.[17] For all these reasons, the use of the phrase 'world-class' in educational debate rarely carries the precision it does in athletics, science or business.

- International evidence will vary, and there is a temptation to cherry-pick to find the view that fits most comfortably with prevailing government ideology. An enthusiasm for privately sponsored competitive schools would, for example, be expected from those who value choice, competition and independence. The Labour government has quoted New Brunswick – a semi-rural Canadian province with a bilingual population about the same size as Leeds – as showing the success of raising the learning leaving age, against considerable scepticism in the UK.[18] Another possibly inappropriate comparator was seen earlier when Tasmania was used as an exemplar for the benefits of school self-government. It is interesting to contrast the use of this evidence with practice – like German apprenticeship or the French Bac – which is rejected as being too different from the UK to draw on. Evidence certainly needs consideration of context before being adopted as a useful comparator for England: but context should not be used as a way of including evidence when it supports your beliefs, and excluding it when it does

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[13] Young, D. (1990) *The Enterprise Years: A Businessman in the Cabinet* (Headline) p.190

[14] See, for example, *Economist* 'Teach the teacher – Tory plans to make schools better' Jan 21st 2010

[15] OECD (2009) *Education at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators accessed* online at www.oecd.org/edu/eaq2009

[16] A good treatment is to be found in Robinson, P. (1997) *Measure for measure: a critical note on the national targets for education and training and international comparisons of educational attainment*. CEP discussion paper; CEPDP0355, 355. Centre for Economic Performance, (London: LSE)

[17] This point was made to me by a teacher who had just returned from working in the Czech Republic, a country often noted for having a higher post 16 participation rate than the UK.

[18] See Wolf, A. (2008) *Diminished Returns. How raising the leaving age to 18 will harm young people and the economy* (London: Policy Exchange).

not. Some overseas examples – China and South Korea were given as examples – can be illuminating even if very different.

In this context it is interesting to consider what UK policy makers do not wish to learn from foreign models – for example, limited use of inspection, integration of further and higher education, strong institutional roles in accreditation, a broader post-16 curriculum, adult apprenticeships, or later entry to formal primary education.

- It is important to be clear about the precise nature of an international comparator. For example, British observers sometimes enthuse over European apprenticeships as an alternative educational route for the non-academic. In fact, continental apprenticeships are often taken after general education is completed, not as a substitute for it. Indeed, they normally include general education elements such as science, foreign language, literature and history in their curriculum.

- Countries rarely advertise their failures. An example: this report's authors have been surprised when talking to overseas colleagues at their perception that NVQ/SVQs and Sector Skills Councils were an unqualified UK success.

Charter schools

2.7   An example of the need for care in international comparison is to be found in the current enthusiasm for establishing publicly funded schools outside the management of local authorities. Politicians from both major parties enthuse about the achievements of Swedish free schools and American charter schools, and look to transfer the formula to the UK. A number of these schools have achieved considerable success, in contrast to more conventional public schools that preceded them. Other studies suggest that charter schools have narrowed the achievement gap and improved overall attainment.[19] However, the success of such schools is contested. One expert witness suggested that careful comparison might place charter school achievements in line with public sector schools with similar intakes.[20] Part of the problem rests in establishing a reliable evidence base amid the different charter laws and funding arrangements in different states.

Sweden

2.8   Similarly, in Sweden there is very little data to compare the performance of independent and municipal schools. There is no national, externally administered system of testing in Sweden before the age of fifteen. But again there is some debate about the evidence that does exist. In a recent interview, Per Thulberg – Director General of the Swedish National Agency for Education – reported that overall academic results in Sweden have actually fallen since the launch of free schools.[21] Other studies suggest a different picture. In a 2007 report, Anders Böhlmark and Mikael Lindahl of Stockholm University estimated the impact of choice between public and state funded independent schools in Sweden.[22] They found that an increase in the 'free school' share by 10 percentage points increased average pupil achievement in all schools by almost 1 percentile rank point – a statistically significant improvement. But again we must look to context when considering international transfer. 'Importing the Swedish model may not make very much difference to the UK's educational status quo. In the early 1990s, Sweden started from a position of no school choice: all pupils had to attend the state school in their neighbourhood. In the UK, however, there is already much school choice and a diversity of provision'.[23]

[19] Whitman, D. (2008) and Dillon, E. (2009)
[20] The US Charter Schools network is commendably honest in publishing negative as well as positive assessments on its website, www.uscharterschools.org.
[21] BBC (2010) *Newsnight – Free Schools* 9th February 2010
[22] Böhlmark, A. and Lindahl, M. (2007)
[23] Holmlund, H. and McNally, S. in *Centrepiece*, the journal of LSE CEPOP Winter 2009/10

The Scots have had a broad based 16–18 qualification for years, without affecting credibility with parents or universities, and a similar change is planned for Wales.

Using UK examples

2.9 Some of our respondents commented that looking at Scottish and Welsh practice would offer opportunities for trans-national learning that would be cheaper and less prone to cultural differences than that of the USA or Sweden. The 50% HE target – claimed to be impossible or nonsensical by many English commentators – has already been achieved in Scotland.[24] The Scots have had a broad based 16–18 qualification for years, without affecting credibility with parents or universities, and a similar change is planned for Wales. This is not to say the Scots have it right in every case. Learning could also take place in the reverse direction: the NEETs problem, for example, is more pronounced in Scotland than in England. Indeed, even within the regions of England there is a diverse organisational landscape of education – 11–16 schools, 11–18 schools, 14–19 high schools, tertiary colleges, selective or comprehensive schools, private schools, faith schools, sixth form colleges (secular and religious), specialist colleges, general FE colleges – that could offer lessons in the effects of structural differences.

2.10 None of the above should be read as a criticism of using international examples to improve and drive forward educational policy. Of course such comparison must take care to ensure that all factors are taken into account, and that evidence has not been selected because it fits current viewpoints. However, properly used, looking at international practice can be one of the most potent ways of analysing the success of new ideas, and refreshing older approaches of value. We argue later for a systematic policy exchange. The recent commission asking NFER to look at international approaches to youth support is an example of good practice in this area.[25]

Cost

2.11 Economic factors will also be present in policy choices. Even without today's straitened budgetary climate, it is reasonable to ask which approach will achieve a given goal at the lowest cost to the taxpayer. The issue here is that cost may conflict with other desirable goals – such as social equality, quality or choice. It may be that this explains why we rarely found a calm assessment of opportunity cost. Regardless of whether you agree with the policy, a good decision-making process should consider what other programmes of educational improvement could be achieved with the allocated budget.

Electoral popularity

2.12 To what extent does popular opinion impact on educational policy? The aim of democracy is, after all, to ensure that the choices that represent the wishes of the bulk of the population are carried through by government. And, as a former Minister told us, education seems to be a topic on which everyone has an opinion because they have experienced it for a portion of their life. We should not therefore be surprised when Ministers have regard to the climate of public opinion when making choices. However, taking a decision because it is popular is sometimes seen as a sign of weakness: recent governments have claimed credit for taking 'tough and unpopular decisions' because they were right for the country. So, the relation between educational policy and public opinion is complex.

- There are educational policy areas where public opinion in itself could be seen as swaying a decision. 'Save our grammar schools' was one that was quoted to us, and the popularity of sixth forms was mentioned by MPs we have spoken to whilst working on other commissions. Heightened public reactions can allow politicians to enact reform to address issues long since known to them – the tragic death of Victoria Climbié was explicitly mentioned as a driver for *Every Child Matters*.[26]

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[24] Though counted a little differently
[25] CfBT – work in progress and as yet unpublished
[26] DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*, London: Stationery Office

- Some topics seem to have particular potential for popular engagement – sex education being an obvious candidate. The public view will come into play more strongly when there is a press campaign for or against a particular approach. Newspapers can be very influential. Michael Barber attributes the ease of passing the 1988 Education Reform Act – a very substantial change in the direction of English education – to some degree to 'lurid tales of left-wing education authorities over-dosing on political correctness', which had 'more than a grain of truth'.[27] Some of our interviewees claimed that it was media hostility to the reform of A Levels that blocked the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report.[28] Ministerial awareness of the power of modern media plays an important part in our story, as we shall see later.

- However, in many areas – skills, funding, governance, awarding bodies, the quality regime – public opinion does not seem to be an issue. Parents and students tend to want what works best for them – an accessible and effective school or college. In some areas, such as university fees, public opinion may even be hostile to government policy, even though research evidence can be in favour.[29]

2.13 One policy that was admittedly introduced for electoral reasons was Labour's 1997 pledge to reduce class sizes in primary schools.[30] The effectiveness of reducing class size is an area of controversy in the literature, with some researchers claiming there is little evidence that it has an effect on pupil outcomes.[31] Yet reducing class size remains popular with parents, and the fact that it was to be funded by the abolition of grant-maintained schools and assisted places helped those policies gain support. David Blunkett explained to us that the class size pledge had another advantage – keeping teacher unions on-side at a time when some innovations they disliked – league tables, local management of schools, increased transparency and parental choice – were being retained by the incoming administration.

Pressure from influential groups
2.14 Experts who read our draft report felt we might have underplayed the role of power in forming policy. It is certainly something that must be borne in mind when seeing how policies can be shaped by the views of those concerned with a particular area: some stakeholders are plainly more equal than others. Pressure can be proactive – for example when business leaders demand action on skills, or university Vice Chancellors insist that a decreasing unit of resource imperils quality higher education. It can also be negative, with powerful interests blocking change – or, as we shall see, subverting its implementation when adopted. The relative power of various groups has changed markedly during the years since Ruskin – with previously dominant local authority and trade union interests losing power. Others have retained influence. Recent amendments to the Children, Schools and Families Bill's provisions on sex and relationship education suggest that religious groups are amongst them. Universities remain powerful, particularly in the discussion of 16–18 qualifications.

Personal experience
2.15 We also learned of politicians whose understanding and choices were strongly influenced by personal views. An insider told us that Tony Blair was as instinctively hostile to local government as Margaret Thatcher had been. We were told of an Education Minister who played down the importance of apprenticeships as a cheap and inferior alternative to a university education.

[27] Barber, M. (2007) *Instruction to Deliver: Tony Blair, the Public Services and the Challenge of Delivery* (Politico's)

[28] DfES (2004a) *14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform* (Tomlinson Report) London: Stationery Office

[29] See work of Prof Nicholas Barr, especially Higher Education Funding in *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2004, pp. 264–283

[30] David Blunkett interview with author

[31] Slavin, R. (1989) Class Size and Student Achievement: Small Effects of Small Classes, in *Educational Psychologist*, Volume 24, Issue 1, January 1989 and Hoxby, C. (2000) The Effects of Class Size on Student Achievement: New Evidence from Population Variation, *Harvard Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2000)

The facts sometimes tell you that there is a problem – say, youth unemployment or poor literacy – without indicating what should be done about it.

Ministers also lean on personal experience – either their own (Estelle Morris worked at a senior level in secondary schools, as did Tessa Blackstone in higher education) or, for better or worse, those of their children in the current education system. This is sometimes reinforced by a process that brings in acquaintances and colleagues from previous posts to influence policy.

Evidence

2.16 Last but emphatically not least was the use of evidence to support policy development and formation. This may seem the most obvious choice. Both Tony Blair and Barack Obama entered power committed to evidence based policy, to implementing what works. David Blunkett established a unit specifically to judge the effectiveness of policy. But as the years pass, we were told, governments show an increasing inclination to downplay evidence. It is possible to take a superior view of this tendency – to ask why politicians and civil servants don't just do what the facts tell them? We suggest a number of reasons why this may be over-simple:

- The facts sometimes tell you that there is a problem – say, youth unemployment or poor literacy – without indicating what should be done about it. We shall come back to this later: it might imply that policy churn could be greater in a world where schools and colleges have sound management information systems (MIS) that allow swift and accurate reporting.

- Evidence relates to means, not ends. Its purpose should be to tell those making important choices what the best way to achieve their aims is. A government committed to social equality will want to know what actions will improve the position of disadvantaged groups. By contrast, an administration committed to competition will look for evidence about measures that improve choice. Sometimes policy goals will conflict. An example: in post-16 studies, we can achieve greater efficiency and lower costs by closing small sixth forms; but this would work against the expansion of choice and competition.

- Evidence must be of high quality – based on a robust sample with appropriate methodologies (for example, randomised controlled trials), showing clear improvement (or failure), discounted for influencing factors like social class or resources. Much that is claimed as evidence fails these tests. There is a particular problem with 'survivor bias'. This is the term given to a deceptive result caused by the fact that only those who succeeded got to the end of a given study. Ministers or civil servants visiting a successful institution – whether at home or on an international visit – could marvel at its success, unaware of those who dropped out, or that a similar institution or approach had failed elsewhere.

- Evidence can be unclear and even contradictory. During our study, two international surveys into the length of the school day were published. One linked the high standards achieved by Far Eastern students to their long school day; the other attributed the success of Scandinavian young people to the fact that they spent fewer hours in school than the British. This suggests a powerful role for meta-studies that synthesise the best studies.

- Evidence is prone to selective use. For example, the report in which Sir Ron Dearing advocated student fees in higher education – which was adopted – came out against foundation degrees – which were also adopted.[32] We even heard from some civil servants of ministers who had asked them to seek evidence that supported their pre-formed views.

- Research and evidence can take a long time. Longitudinal studies can run into decades. Politicians, as we shall see, necessarily work on a shorter time frame than this.

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[32] National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (the Dearing Report). Available at
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/

- Good practice cannot always be replicated. Local culture, appropriate staffing and resources can affect whether the good – or bad – results shown in one area or study will be repeated elsewhere. This relates to our earlier point (para 2.6) about cultural issues in international comparison.

Is the evidence there?

2.17 We discovered a hornet's nest when asking about the usefulness of educational research, with a clear divide between the policy community and the researchers. Some of our witnesses said that a major problem with using evidence for educational policy was that there was little useful stuff about. More than one senior civil servant commented critically on the availability of worthwhile research, comparing the resources available to Education Departments unfavourably with the useful material accessed by other government departments. Another of our experts longed for researchers to ask the crucial question 'so what?' when choosing topics for study. An adviser told us: 'until research becomes more timely and relevant, politicians will continue to ignore it'. Another adviser, emphasising the same point, criticised the focus of the research that was available, and also its quality – i.e. it was based on too small a sample. We were told that this paucity of evidence was a reason that international examples of practice were sought. By contrast, others we spoke to, particularly those from the research community, vehemently denied that there was a lack of useful material, and claimed 'there is a lot of relevant research which relates to policy'. One quoted the Department's own research website as a useful source, though we did hear from a civil servant researcher, who prefers to remain anonymous, of the difficulty of interesting policy insiders with even the Department's own relevant findings. The Teaching and Learning Research programme[33] was also mentioned. Some research has plainly been very influential – such as Kathy Sylva's on Sure Start,[34] the work on school effectiveness and school improvement following the Rutter Report,[35] and the excellent material that supported the Bullock Report.[36] More worrying, we were told of good research that has been ignored. Examples included Alison Wolf's work on the weak returns to NVQ2, and SKOPE's study of the labour market, training and apprenticeships, which casts substantial doubt on the underpinning logic of the Leitch Report (Keep 2009).

2.18 The issue, then, may be better expressed as a former Chief Education Officer and government adviser did – 'research is not well connected to policy'. A good way to meet this problem – and the parallel one, that research is unclear and contradictory – would be for policy makers to use experts and intermediaries to summarise the research. This, we were told, was the role that used to be played by inspectors; others spoke of the role of institutions like the former Further Education Development Agency in identifying profitable approaches. It would open up areas where evidence could be deployed to promote effective policies. It also needs to be said that sometimes evidence is not the same as research – for example, the gap in funding between school sixth forms and further education colleges is a matter of simple arithmetic.

2.19 What would be the sign of a rational, evidence-based policy? We looked for a number of criteria:

- Research and evidence supporting any change is identified by the policy's sponsors when the policy is launched – and ideally, any contrary evidence.

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[33] see http://www.tlrp.org/

[34] Ballie, C., Sylva, K. and Evans, E. (2000) Do intervention programmes for parents, aimed at improving children's literacy, really work? In Buchanan, A. and Hudson, B. *Promoting Children's Emotional Well-being*, Oxford University Press.

[35] Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J. with Smith, A. (1979) *15000 hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children*. London: Open Books; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[36] Bullock, A. (1975) *A language for life* Report of the Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA. London: HMSO

- The purpose of the policy change is clearly specified, answering the cynical question 'To what problem is this the solution?'
- International comparisons are relevant and comprehensive.
- The introduction involves pilots, not pathfinders.
- The intended outcomes are clearly specified in advance, using SMART targets.
- Impact is measured and reported in a way agreed before implementation.

Used honestly, research and evidence have enormous potential in securing a system that provides greater opportunities for our people, more skills for our economy, and increasing knowledge and understanding of our world. We shall come later, in our recommendations, to look at how this might be better achieved.

There is a large body of literature that describes a major transformation in the organising principles of social provision across the public sector that took place in the late twentieth century.

3. What we learned from the literature review

3.1 The volume of documentation and research about the development of England's educational policy over the last 34 years is vast. Our strategy in reviewing the literature was to focus on documentation that related to key changes within our chosen themes. Even this approach has, during the course of the investigation, turned up more commentary, official documentation, related research and other materials than we could possibly include in this report. Our reference list stands at over 250 documents and represents a small sample of the wider body of knowledge relevant to our exploration. Our investigation aimed to identify the process of educational policy change in England from the Ruskin College speech by James Callaghan to the present day, with a focus on the role of evidence. This section draws together a summary of what we have learned from these materials.

Educational policy and government reform

3.2 It was clear from our reading that educational policy is not developed in isolation. It is strongly influenced by trends in central government about effective governance. There is a large body of literature that describes a major transformation in the organising principles of social provision across the public sector that took place in the late twentieth century. This 'paradigm shift' in the way that public services are organised, managed and controlled, from the 'old style' bureaucratic structures and governing systems, which was in the words of an OECD study,[37] 'highly centralised, rule bound, and inflexible', to what is often referred to as 'New Public Management', has several distinctive features.

3.3 These reforms favour institutional autonomy, marketisation, emphasis on financial management and an inclination to benchmark against the private sector.[38] These tendencies have resulted in the introduction of measures designed to drive up quality and secure better value for money – output information, league tables, minimum standards, improvement targets and associated increases in institutional transparency and accountability. These can be seen right across public service in England – in his memoirs John Major makes clear that the transparency and local management for education was part of a cross-government thrust – and have been continued and developed through both Conservative and Labour administrations. A notable example is the mechanism of Public Service Agreements (PSA), adopted in 1998, which had an impact on all public provision (e.g. hospitals as well as schools or colleges), specifically in terms of the way that targets were used to prioritise funding and data were used to monitor performance. Commentators also observed a marked change in the language used in implementing reforms – particular in relation to education. An issues paper from the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training[39] contrasted the language used in the past to describe education – e.g. 'a conversation between the generations of mankind' or 'the source of common enlightenment and common enjoyment' – to phrases used in contemporary parlance, e.g. 'measurable outputs', 'performance indicators', and 'curriculum delivery'.

3.4 Similar reforms are observed beyond England's borders; the general trajectories can be seen across a number of countries over the period of our investigation. Another feature of this public reform movement is the rapid expansion of a 'middle tier' of organisations between

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[37] OECD (1995) *Governance in Transition: Public Management Reforms in OECD Countries*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2, rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, France

[38] Sporn, B. (2003) *Convergence or Divergence in International Higher Education Policy: Lessons from Europe*. Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. Ford Policy Forum, pp. 31–44. At: http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ffpfp0305.pdf (accessed 04 November 2009)

[39] Pring, R. *et al* ed. (2009) *Education for All: The Future of Education and Training for 14–19 Year Olds* (Nuffield 14–19 Study Final Report) Routledge

government and public service supplier. Many of these organisations are known in the UK as 'non-departmental public bodies' (NDPB) – 'quangos' (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations). Executive agencies – closer to departments but still discrete business units – were also established to deliver services, with the 1988 Next Steps programme[40] leading to the creation of 133 specialised executive agencies over the following ten years, employing 375,000 staff – about 77% of the UK Civil Service. An influential review of Next Steps agencies[41] broadly concluded '… the agency model has been a success. Since 1988 agencies have transformed the "landscape" of government and the responsiveness and effectiveness of services delivered by central government'.

Educational policy integrated with other policy areas

3.5 Since 1976 educational policy has become increasingly interrelated with other areas of government. This particular 'bringing together' of what was formerly separate is shown in the structural changes to government departments, and in influential programmes such as Every Child Matters, where education, health and social care policy have been brought together around the individual. One can also map the emphasis placed on the importance of education to individual employment prospects and to national prosperity, where even the names tell a story. We have seen the move from a Department of Education and Science – implicitly concerned with the acquisition and transfer of knowledge – to a Department for Education and Employment, then Department of Education and Skills and, more recently, further and higher education working under a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills – where the emphasis is strongly shifted to economic benefits.

The extent of educational policy change

3.6 The literature and media commentaries give a firm impression of an ever-increasing number of policy changes and initiatives, reforms that can be overwhelming to those who are expected to deliver them. Attempting to measure the extent or amount of these changes would pose great methodological difficulties, particularly in capturing and comparing the magnitude of the essentially subjective impressions of those experiencing the change. Instead, we focused on exploring components of England's political and administrative system that were highly visible: political leadership, organisational configuration, legislative events and the production of official documentation.

3.7 Figure 1 (page 20) shows changes made to the political leadership and departments from 1976 to the present. Extensive and increasingly radical changes at departmental level are evident from John Major onwards, with the linkages between the top tiers of administrative apparatus behind education and industry becoming more complex over time. As this complexity has increased, the length of tenure of senior ministers assigned to educational departments has decreased (see figure 2, page 21). Members of our panel of experts suggested that the tenure of public servants was also becoming increasingly transient. They cited factors such as the Gershon Review[42] and a tendency for the most able to be moved more frequently; both of which have consequences in terms of institutional memory loss.

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[40] In 1988, under the directorship of Sir Robin Ibbs, the Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit was asked to 'assess the progress achieved in improving management in the Civil Service'. The Unit's response to this request took the form a report entitled *Improving Management in Government: the Next Steps*. This report became known as the *Ibbs Report* or the *Next Steps Report*, and was accepted by Margaret Thatcher in February 1988.

[41] Office of Public Sector Reform (2002) *Better Public Services – Executive Agencies in the 21st Century* (author: Sir Angus Fraser)

[42] HM Treasury (2004) *Releasing Resources for the Frontline: Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency* (The Gershon Review – available from HM Treasury website) London: Stationery Office

Figure 1: Changes at the top – political and departmental changes since 1976

The effects of rapid change

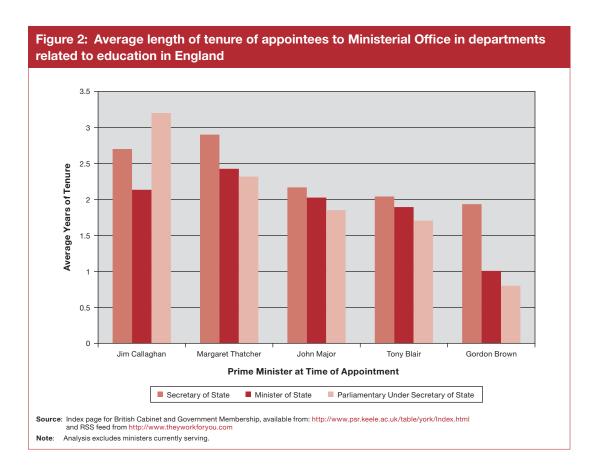**3.8** Commentators suggest that it may take years before the benefits of a new policy or structural reorganisation can be realised, and that the pace of change can prevent this from happening. The first-past-the-post electoral system and the vagaries in England's constitution (i.e. that it is tacit, if it exists at all) are cited as influential factors enabling politicians to make changes that prevent or delay reaping the benefits which would have otherwise ensued from past departmental reorganisations. To balance these assertions, other commentators suggest that the rapidly changing administrative structure is a sign of responsive government machinery. What can be said with some certainty is that the pace of change at all levels is increasingly viewed as an issue by civil servants and those working in education.

Different sectors

3.9 Primary, secondary, further and higher education have been subject to different levels of direct government intervention. The organisations overseeing each of the stages of education have also undergone changes in regulation, funding or administration. We illustrate these in Figure 3 (page 22) with reference to the high-level arrangements for funding in particular, where the relative stability of the primary and secondary phases can be seen.

Figure 2: Average length of tenure of appointees to Ministerial Office in departments related to education in England

3.10 In higher education, with only a short period of reorganisation following the Education Reform Act in 1988, the agencies responsible for funding universities saw stability. The Universities Grant Committee (UGC) was established in 1919 and lasted until 1988 when it was transformed into the Universities Funding Council. In 1981 the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education was established in response to the Oakes Committee Report, and later replaced by the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council. These bodies were then merged into the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 1992, which has remained unchanged up to the present day.

3.11 In further education, to contrast, the period since the 1970s saw the inception of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), its dissolution and the creation of the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), the creation of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC – taking control of further education from local authorities) and the amalgamation of FEFC and TECs into the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2001. The Learning and Skills Council underwent several high-profile internal reorganisations during its existence. Even so, by the time this report is published, it will have been replaced by the Skills Funding Agency, the National Apprenticeship Service and the Young People's Learning Agency.

The influence of agencies

3.12 Another major reason for the pace of change highlighted by commentators is the shift of responsibility for policy development from a partially legislative process, and the benefits of scrutiny this entails, to intermediary agencies. Consultation is then undertaken at the discretion,

Figure 3: Organisational changes to funding agencies for further and higher education

and under the control, of government or their intermediaries. These agencies were also often very active, and heavily staffed (e.g. in 2002 the Learning and Skills Council employed 4,800 people), directing their efforts in the production of increasingly detailed and condition-laden policy, regulation and guidance. This, combined with the volume of centrally driven initiatives, has led to complicated and burdensome system in the eyes of many. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills[43] puts it thus:

> 'A substantial proportion of the complex swathe of organisations, processes and requirement in the English skills system were the result of the cumulative impact of multiple well-intentioned initiatives going back over 15 years. Initially deriving from significant individual or collective provider lapses in quality, financial probity or accountability, each requirement or organisation was introduced to restore public confidence or improve value for money. Individually, the impact of each may have been minimal; cumulatively, they have come to represent a crippling burden on employers and providers.'

3.13 It needs to be emphasised that many of the changes that have been introduced have been plainly beneficial – few would now dissent with a degree of local management of institutions,

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[43] UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009) *Towards Ambition 2020: skills, jobs, growth*. Available from http://www.ukces.org.uk/server.php?show=ConFileDoc.167

Rather than focusing on the management of 'delivery', as they have for much of the last decade, Whitehall will have to grasp a new role as the guardian of coherence…

or transparency in educational outcomes. Other policy changes – such as Individual Learning Accounts or some aspects of the Private Finance Initiative – may have been wasteful but few have been malign. This seems to suggest that practitioner complaints in England about changes in policy may arise from the size and nature of the changes themselves, but are magnified by what is seen as their exclusion from the consultative process. Fossum and Kubow called for policy and research discourses to be widened to include practitioners at their heart.[44] We show later, using the Educational Reform Act 1988 as an example, how widening consultative approaches can build support for quite radical and lasting change.

3.14 There is another way in which this pace of change, or the perceptions of it, may be addressed by government. A recent report from the Institute for Government[45] calls for central government to fundamentally recast its role in a way pertinent to this discussion:

> *'Rather than focusing on the management of 'delivery', as they have for much of the last decade, Whitehall will have to grasp a new role as the guardian of coherence, providing clear priorities and leadership to increasingly complex, fragmented and, sometimes, messy systems for delivery and co-production.'*

Findings from our investigation lend support to this recommendation.

The process of educational policy development

3.15 The level of complexity inherent in the policy formation process should not be underestimated. The interrelations between external socio-economic forces, the political system, the machinery of government and the media in determining the eventual policy expression are context specific. Figure 4 (page 24) lays out a general model (by definition an over-simplification) for understanding these interrelations, and is an adaptation of the work of Pollitt and Bouckaert[46] with reference to the results of our investigation. Relationships between and among the different influences are represented by arrows, and the main opportunities, within the overarching political process, for evidence to have an impact are highlighted in red boxes.

The next section summarises our investigation into several emblematic changes to educational policy and discusses the way they were undertaken in more detail. It is worth restating that no assessment of these policies is intended.

The national curriculum

3.16 The period 1976 to 1988 charts the emergence of a national curriculum, from the advocacy of a common curriculum without centralised control to one led by the Secretary of State for Education by the Education Reform Act 1988. The drivers were made clear over this period. In a 1985 White Paper, the Government states its principal aims for the reforms: 'to raise standards at all levels of ability… [and] to secure the best possible return from the resources'. The nature of this 'return' consists of the provision of qualified and skilled adults to the workforce at a level comparable with other European nations, with a goal of maintaining economic competitiveness. Concern was also expressed at the disparity of achievement within and between schools – the standard of pupil achievement varied enormously. Another driver for setting the national curriculum was accountability: before measuring standards it was required for these to be specified and agreed.

[44] Fossum, P. and Kubow, P. (2003) 'Teacher peripheralisation in Comparative Education: causes, consequences and some responses' in Ginsburg, M. and Gorostiaga, J. (eds) *Limitations and possibilities of dialogue among researchers, policymakers and practitioners*, Routledge Falmer, New York pp. 83–94
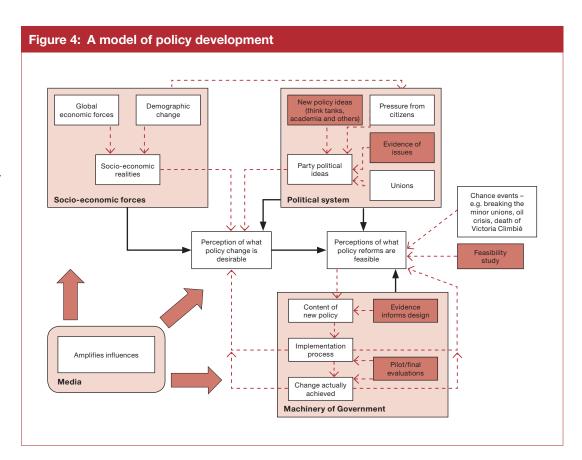
[45] Institute for Government *Shaping Up: A Whitehall for the Future* London (2010)

[46] Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2004) *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition)

The National Strategies were created in collaboration with teachers, and piloted in most cases for at least a year before they were rolled out nationally.

Figure 4: A model of policy development

3.17 The way the process unfolded was as follows. Initial suggestions by the Government that the curriculum should be overseen by the Secretary of State for Education were followed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) discussion papers, surveys of both primary and secondary education and extensive consultation. The major papers preceding the act are displayed below (figure 5). The changes achieved were far reaching and holistic. Putting aside questions as to whether these changes were right, or whether they have led to greater progress towards the policy goals they aimed at, the effects, in the main, have survived a period of rapid development and are felt over 20 years later. The lead-up to the Education Reform Act saw a slow building of momentum through consultation, with due recourse to research, expertise through the HMI and evidence. This would suggest that a considered and holistic approach to altering the system of education promises greater longevity for a reform. Nevertheless, political memoirs tell us of disagreement between Margaret Thatcher and Kenneth Baker about the amount of prescription appropriate for a national curriculum.

National Strategies

3.18 Central government's interest in curriculum moved beyond prescribing content towards pedagogy, led by National Strategies in primary literacy and numeracy, followed by National Strategies for other curriculum subjects and phases, and to the Reading Recovery Project, and reflected in the National Grid for Learning's aim of curriculum support. The primary strategies included expectations of time allocations to primary literacy and numeracy. The National Strategies were created in collaboration with teachers, and piloted in most cases 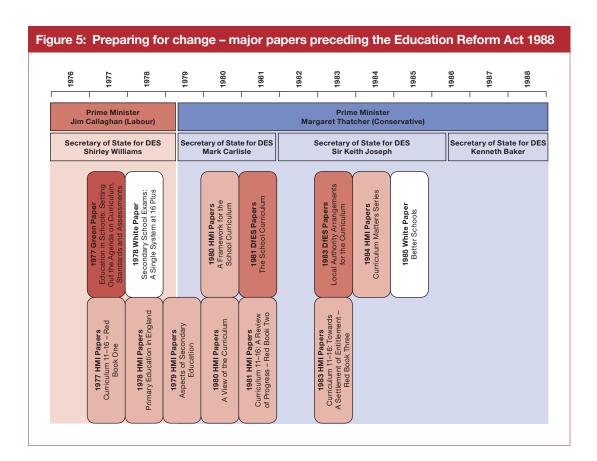for at least a year before they were rolled out nationally. The high priority given to numeracy and literacy in the primary curriculum

Figure 5: Preparing for change – major papers preceding the Education Reform Act 1988

1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988

Prime Minister Jim Callaghan (Labour) | **Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Conservative)**

Secretary of State for DES Shirley Williams | **Secretary of State for DES Mark Carlisle** | **Secretary of State for DES Sir Keith Joseph** | **Secretary of State for DES Kenneth Baker**

1977 Green Paper Education in Schools: Setting Out the Agenda on Curriculum, Standards and Assessments

1978 White Paper Secondary School Exams: A Single System at 16 Plus

1980 HMI Papers A Framework for the School Curriculum

1981 DfES Papers The School Curriculum

1983 DfES Papers Local Authority Arrangements for the Curriculum

1984 HMI Papers Curriculum Matters Series

1985 White Paper Better Schools

1977 HMI Papers Curriculum 11–16 – Red Book One

1978 HMI Papers Primary Education in England

1979 HMI Papers Aspects of Secondary Education

1980 HMI Papers A View of the Curriculum

1981 HMI Papers Curriculum 11–16: A Review of Progress – Red Book Two

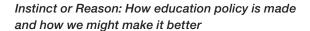**1983 HMI Papers** Curriculum 11–16: Towards A Settlement of Entitlement – Red Book Three

was matched by the introduction of national targets for primary phase attainment in literacy and numeracy, couched in terms of cohort levels on Key Stage tests. Curriculum intervention was seen as the primary way of meeting those attainment targets. While the National Strategies programme is being discontinued, this is not a move away from curricular strategy but rather a decentralisation of guidance from National Strategies to local School Improvement Partners.

3.19 Government drew on an evidence base from development projects, but commentators suggest there was little consideration of how this might be context-specific. The case presented in official literature for improving literacy and numeracy was based on poor national performance in international tests and on the government statistics on cohort attainment in Key Stage tests. However, some suggest the latter were misused by assuming that the predictive link between primary attainment and achievement at age 16 implied a causal link. Similarly, the rationale for introducing the Key Stage 3 strategy relied heavily on the untested assumption that improved test performance at the primary phase was due to the National Strategies.

3.20 National Strategies were also significant in illustrating both the tendency toward more focused central prescription (curriculum requirements were being relaxed elsewhere) and that the organisational configuration was such that legislation was not necessary to enforce these changes. It moved away from the spirit of the Education Reform Act which explicitly prevented the Secretary of State from prescribing curriculum delivery. While not mandated through legislation, an increased focus on literacy and numeracy was enforced through HMI inspections and reviews of the National Curriculum.

Every Child Matters

3.21 Some policy changes have appeared to have been catalysed by events with heightened public reaction. As we have seen, the tragic death of Victoria Climbié is cited as a driver behind the *Every Child Matters* White Paper, which outlined wide-reaching reforms aligning policy around the individual. In the same way, the announcement that Key Stage 3 tests would be replaced by teacher assessments has been tied to highly publicised problems with marking SATs. These examples of isolated events were both explicitly and publicly tied to their respective policy changes by members of the government, but both address long-standing issues that were acknowledged before the events, and the political opportunities this presented, hastened them.

We were told that the strength of ideology is made more powerful by the tendency for Prime Ministers to appoint and support those who share their beliefs.

4. What the interviews told us

4.1   We conducted 20 formal interviews, mostly in the autumn of 2009: they involved a wide range of influential policy advisers and commentators, politicians and civil servants. Less formal comment and anecdotes from expert witnesses and those who read our drafts have also been noted. We also fed in interviews and comments from other commissions in which the team had recently participated – which have included funding issues, option studies for a number of individual colleges, exploring post-16 provision in major cities and a research monograph on post-16 structures. The themes that are distilled in this section come mostly from an analysis of the formal interview transcripts. We need to emphasise that they represent what we were told, not what the project team thinks. Particular care needs to be taken as our sample included rather more civil servants and practitioners than politicians and political advisers. This may have the effect of emphasising the impact of changes, rather than the motives for taking them.

The power of ideology
4.2   A common theme from our interviews was the power of ideology in shaping policy. Indeed, we heard that 'evidence can do little in politically charged areas'. Several interviewees spoke of the dominant belief in markets, and the associated belief that choice and competition will lead to lower costs and higher standards. We were told this was 'an article of faith' amongst policy makers, leading to (for example) league tables, self-governing schools and colleges and activity-based budgets.[47] Some aspects of the new approach are widely welcomed: it is difficult to argue with the need for transparency in resourcing and results. Tony Blair took the opportunity of his last Labour conference speech to trenchantly defend moves to give poorer people the choice and information that had always been available to the rich. There is a case for caution, however, if an enthusiasm for the conventional wisdom grates with some of the findings of the literature: for example, evidence that competition raises educational standards is, at best, arguable.[48] The effectiveness of market forces in securing value for money was also contested: an interviewee who had worked on HE funding at the highest level claimed that the planned approach from the PCFC and later FEFC had proved considerably more successful in reducing costs than an allegedly market-based approach from the UGC. Though there was a widespread welcome for the improvement in capital provision in schools and colleges, we heard similar doubts about the benefits of the Private Finance Initiative.

4.3   The enthusiasm for business models may explain another trend our interviewees noted: the popularity of business leaders as advisers on policy change, ahead of educationalists. Their ability to cut through problems has been appreciated by Ministers from both parties. However, this has its limits. We have already noted in para 4.16 the scepticism about the Leitch Report. Additionally, some of our witnesses felt that the Webb Report on Further Education in Wales[49] – prepared by a former Vice Chancellor – contrasted favourably with a similar report on further education in England by Sir Andrew Foster, a former auditor.[50]

The power of Number Ten
4.4   We were told that the strength of ideology is made more powerful by the tendency for Prime Ministers to appoint and support those who share their beliefs. Interviewees said that this is

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[47] One aspect of the positive regard for market-based solutions is that even policies which reduce freedom and choice – as in the FE funding reforms titled *Delivering World-class Skills in a Demand-led System (DfES/LSC 2007)* – have to be titled 'demand-led', when plainly they are not.

[48] Gibbons, Machin and Silva (2006)

[49] Welsh Assembly (2007) *Promise and Performance: report of the Independent Review of the Mission and Purpose of Further Education in Wales in the context of Learning Country: Vision into Action* ('The Webb Report')

[50] Foster, A. (2005) *Realising the potential: a review of the future role of Further Education colleges*, accessed online at
http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/furthereducation/uploads/documents/REALISING06.pdf

Some went as far as to tell us that the advice, let alone dissent, of senior civil servants is no longer required.

reinforced by the selection of key individuals as political advisers, some of whom appeared to have more power than departmental ministers. One witness told of the chill that went round the room when Andrew Adonis entered a DfES meeting; others named Michael Barber, Cyril Taylor, and going back to Thatcher, influential individuals like Rhodes Boyson. The creation of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit systematises this centralisation of power. Prime Minister, Cabinet, and Treasury take a closer view of the work of individual departments than before. This is not new – the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), created by Edward Heath in 1971 as a unit independent of Departments, can be seen as the parent of the Number Ten Policy Unit. However, the increasing pressure of the centre means that the job of the Minister moves from 'running the Department' to 'delivering'[51] the government's 'vision' for a service.

Advice and dissent

4.5 When we asked about the role of advice and dissent, we found a marked difference in perception between those working on the political side of policy – advisers and Ministers – and the civil servants and inspectors responsible for advice and implementation. Political advisers told us that lively debate and the clash of ideas were welcomed. 'I was always free to express a contrary view' said one. 'I made a point of seeing a wide range of stakeholders, researchers and practitioners, and what they told me influenced thinking. The idea that dissent is not allowed is too simplistic'. Another remembered with affection a Secretary of State who 'only respected senior officials that challenged his point of view'. This is in marked contrast with the testimony of a number of interviewees who had worked in the departments: they spoke of the increased imposition of the Prime Minister's view, via his or her Ministers, and its effects on the role of the civil service. Some went as far as to tell us that the advice, let alone dissent, of senior civil servants is no longer required. They compared the days when the Secretary of State or Minister would make no pronouncement on education without the professional advice of the relevant staff – such as HMI or Chief HMI – with a world where 'there are few independent, respected voices'; more cuttingly, we were told that civil service career progression depended on compliance. To some degree this division of view reflects the suspicion of the civil service mentioned by Callaghan, shared by the Tories under Thatcher, and present in New Labour's early years[52] – shown in Steve Richards' *New Statesman* article we quote in our suggested reading. Any weakening of dissent or caution would be more significant when associated with the decline in the checks on power that were represented in the past by local government or trade unions.

4.6 This is not to say that those in the field cannot slow down reforms. Some who do not share the governmental view can act locally in a way that weakens implementation. Many school heads do not see themselves as competitors in the local education market, but partners in a network. Outright subversion of policy seemed rare, though we were told of examples. John Major's autobiography speaks of 'appalling' tactics being used to defeat grant-maintained school ballots.[53] We heard from contributors that the attempt to introduce the nursery voucher scheme was weakened – for example, by primary schools refusing to admit children who had not previously chosen their own, local authority run, provision.[54] But if defiance was exceptional, there were more examples of those entrusted with delivery bending policy and resources to their own ends – a process that has become known as 'producer capture'. The Work Related Non-Advanced Further Education (WRNAFE) process, introduced in the 1984 Training for Jobs White Paper,[55]

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[51] Or, worse, 'delivering on'. Where did this preposition come from, and why?

[52] See Richards, S. 'Why Labour Ministers Rage Against Whitehall' *New Statesman* 5 June 2000

[53] Major p. 399

[54] 'We have want we wanted – universal availability of nursery education. But it is not as we wanted it. Choice has been stifled. Regulation is rife. Standards are not what they should be.' (Major 1999 p. 400)

[55] DoE (1984) *Training for Jobs* (Cmnd 9135) London: HMSO

Negative findings – telling us of areas where policies do not offer value for money or real solutions – are often as valuable as positive ones.

aimed to give employers and the Dept of Employment greater power over funding for technical education: our interviewees felt it was reduced in practice to a formalistic box-ticking process which left local authorities with their FE budget – and practice – essentially untouched. Similarly, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) aimed to bring work-related disciplines to the classroom; instead, former heads and principals remembered with affection how it provided schools and colleges with an easily accessed fund for wide-ranging curriculum innovation. The FEFC was instructed not to fund qualifications outside the national framework: it continued to do so, and indeed its successors still do. Examples that show how the field can weaken or bend centrally imposed policy change, though, can strengthen the suspicion that policy makers have of those outside their circle, creating more distance between those making policy and those delivering it. Michael Barber, noting that 'officials in the department tried desperately to block … the idea of publishing a list of the worst schools in the country', relished 'the symbolic value of the announcement … (and) … the shock it gave to the system'.[56]

Working with the grain

4.7 The suspicion of the cartel-like behaviour of educational institutions and the resistance of Ministers to negative assessments means that those who wish to comment on policy proposals must take a measured, almost diluted approach if they wish to stay in contact with government. Our informants contrasted the influence of the Association of School and College Leaders, experienced in taking a nuanced approach to reform, with the loss of influence arising from the more oppositional stance of the NUT. Research projects, too, must work with the grain of policy to be valued: we were told of one valuable project whose findings were rejected by government because 'relationships started to go wrong from the start'.

4.8 Of course, dissenters from proposed policy changes need not be any more rational or evidence-based than the reforms they oppose: sometimes they are plainly less so. However, there is a problem if Ministers and senior policy makers become overly sensitive to adverse comment and evidence about their policies. Negative findings – telling us of areas where policies do not offer value for money or real solutions – are often as valuable as positive ones. Scientific method has, since Popper, suggested that negative evidence should be sought and cherished, for the only effective test of theory is withstanding disproof. We have to recognise, though, that the realities of adversarial politics often make it difficult to admit a wrong turning, which is why we later suggest that politicians might well gain from delegating decisions on methodology to an expert forum.

The view from the top

4.9 Contributors felt that one aspect of the politicisation of delivery is that decisions are taken higher up the chain of command. This does not necessarily mean choices will be less well evidenced, but it does increase the likely politicisation of decisions. The decision to fund English courses for asylum-seekers was taken by a second-tier officer in the FEFC: it was later countermanded, as part of a 'crack-down on bogus asylum seekers', at Ministerial level. The FEFC commissioned the Kennedy Report on Widening Participation[57] without Ministerial intervention – an expression of freedom hardly likely in today's world. There have always been Ministerial enthusiasms that have supported pilots; we were told that these now take substantial slices of mainstream budgets. The dislike of 'postcode lotteries' – that is, different entitlements and practice in different areas – also has the effect of centralising power.[58] As a result, local solutions

[56] Barber, M. (2007) *Instruction to Deliver: Tony Blair, the Public Services and the Challenge of Delivery* (Politico's)

[57] FEFC (1997) *Learning Works* Report of a Committee of Enquiry chaired by Baroness Kennedy, at http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=t713406264~tab=issueslist~branches=25 - v25

[58] See Ringen (2009) – a wonderful graphic approach as well as a convincing critique of centralisation.

and variations are eliminated – what one of our experts described as 'the end of experimentation'. This matters, as the distance from government is important for innovation: the MSC had room to experiment, the LSC hardly any and the planned Young People's Learning Agency probably none at all. The loss of elbow room is not helpful: to take one example, we heard arguments that positive solutions to the problem of NEETs were most likely to come from local organisations shaping responses to local circumstances. Yet the departmental response has been to introduce – indeed impose – national patterns of provision, contracting and funding for this work. This may be a factor in explaining why the position on NEETs has remained essentially unchanged despite years of substantial expenditure and targeting. One witness spoke of political enthusiasm for 'designing our way out', losing the very flexibility that might make a difference.

4.10   Two of our interviewees commented that the trend for all meaningful decisions to be taken at the highest level seems to be reflected in the spreading practice, perhaps another import from the commercial world, of increasing the importance of the Chair of public bodies, as against the Chief Executive. Once, the Chair's role was to support and assess the work of the CEO. Nowadays, we were told, the Chair was often the one driving strategy and transmitting government policies, with the CEO having more of a delivery role. The popularity of appointing chairs from outside the relevant sector – can increase the tension in this arrangement. It should be noted that there have been occasions where neither Chief Executive nor Chair come from the relevant sector – as when the LSC's chair was the former Chief Executive of BP Amoco, and its Chief Executive from Mirror Group Newspapers.

Pilots to Pathfinders

4.11   Interviewees commented on the use of pilots. Pilots could be a strong part of an evidence-based policy system. However, we were told they were rarely used to trial possible approaches: the introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) was an exception. The more general tend is to look for 'Pathfinders' as the first stage of a policy 'roll-out'. Even then the learning was sometimes not well used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of new policy: the recent Public Accounts Committee report on Train To Gain, a scheme to encourage employer-based training, noted that 'extensive pilots showed that rapid growth would be challenging, but the Department set unrealistically high targets for the first two years. Even though the pilots indicated it would be difficult to expand the programme quickly, the Department's targets for the first two years overestimated demand from employers and the capacity of training providers to meet demand'.[59] It recommended that when bringing forward future programmes, the Department should require evidence that targets are based on a proper analysis of pilot work, especially where the intention is to create new demand.

The information explosion

4.12   Some of our interviewees asked whether Ministerial determination to intervene – and suspicion of the worth of the educational establishment – could be a result of the increase in information delivered to them. One factor shared by public service with private is the increasing use of IT-based reporting systems. This means that information on participation, staffing, results, costs and other dimensions of performance can be fed back swiftly to the centre. Ministers know speedily what has happened to Key Stage 3 results, to the numbers of NEETs, to the numbers passing Level 2 vocational qualifications, university admissions and to all the other areas of interest. Poor and strong performers can be revealed, and trends noted. This is of particular importance in a political

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[59] Public Accounts Committee (Jan 2010) *Train to Gain: Developing the Skills of the Workforce* London: HMS0.

[The loss of corporate memory] will be more pronounced if it is true, as we were told earlier, that the most outstanding civil servants move most often.

world where the Treasury has agreed targets with departments, and is monitoring the progress – 'gradient' – towards them. Sometimes the analysis of information can give hints about the nature and sources of problems, but often the flow of facts indicates something is going wrong without indicating what is to be done about it. Worse, it can provide a strong incentive for hasty intervention.

The role of the Civil Service

4.13   The politicisation of decisions and the increase in information from the field do not diminish the workload of the Civil Service. In many ways, they increase their importance. The education civil service has grown in size in the years since Ruskin, especially when it is remembered that numbers of civil servants left for quangos such as the TECs/FEFC/LSC. The politicisation of delivery as well as policy has brought more decisions into the purview of the civil servants – for example, the design of Diplomas, which would in the past have been the job of the Schools Council. We were told that some important policies – such as Modern Apprenticeships – owed their origin to senior civil servants. The absence of major reports – the lack of a Robbins, Newsom, Plowden, Bullock, Swann or Russell at the head of substantial commissions of enquiry – also increases administrative elbow room. It is striking that recent reports of substance have had to be funded outside government – by the Nuffield Foundation (The Review of 14–19 Education and Training), Paul Hamlyn Foundation (National Commission on Education), or the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (The Alexander Report). The government preference is for more sharply focused reports, sometimes under those with experience of public policy – like Sir Ron Dearing – but frequently using business leaders (like Lord Leitch, who reported on skills, or Lord Browne on HE fees), or those with an accounting background (like Sir Andrew Foster, who reported on the future of FE colleges). These reports receive or commission evidence, but this is often from interested parties rather than independent researchers: with honourable exceptions, they give less scope for considered research evidence. An additional issue for such one-off reports is that they are rarely joined up: one of our witnesses noted that the 'enquiries into further and higher education were never aligned, even though they were the two main components of post-compulsory education'.

Corporate memory

4.14   We were also told of the increasing turnover of civil servants. There is a degree to which this is a good thing: we received evidence from one former government official who entered the Ministry of Education in the 1950s and stayed there during his entire career. Focused career development – as when the Conservatives switched the top staff of Employment and Education so that they could each better understand the work of the other – aims to improve the policy process, especially in a world where, as we have seen, successful policy demands greater overlap between departments. However, career development must be seen as a servant of improved delivery, not an end in itself. A number of our interviewees – including a former Secretary of State – worried about what was described as 'the loss of corporate memory', losing learning from earlier events and so repeating mistakes or missing opportunities. A political insider told us this was 'a hugely important point'. It will be more pronounced if it is true, as we were told earlier, that the most outstanding civil servants move most often. Geoff Stanton's monograph[60] reviewing the record on 14–19 curriculum change gives an example of the problem. Another witness drew the attention of a DfES staffer to similarities between an inspectorate report on college success with a similar study five years before: he was told 'I wouldn't know – I was working with the Prison Service then'. This lack of expertise may explain the curious ignorance of vocational qualifications like BTEC that was shown in justifying Diplomas.[61]

[60] Stanton, G.P. (2009) *Learning Matters – Making the 14–19 reforms work for learners,* Reading: CfBT Education Trust.
[61] Though there is backing for something like the Diplomas in Steedman and West (*Finding Our Way: Vocational Education in England* LSE Centre for Economic Performance Paper 18 – 2003) http://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/publications/abstract.asp?index=1968

Media influence

4.15 Many of our interviewees spoke of the influence of the media, especially the *Daily Mail* and the papers in the News International group, and political programmes such as (crucially) the Radio 4 *Today Programme*. David Blunkett, in his diaries, is pleased that he can explain his policies 'in the key 8.10 slot on the *Today Programme* two days running'. Gillian Shephard[62] mentions John Major's exasperation as yet another Cabinet colleague boasts of their appearance on that programme. Civil servants with a longer view did not welcome the new obsession with media reaction. They told of a former world where there were no, or few press officers in Departments, and when launching programmes to the press was the final link in a long policy chain. 'We produced clearly written, boring but truthful documents – with a press statement' said one. 'Now there must be hundreds who are more concerned with image and sound bites than the careful weighing of evidence'. Today, we are told, the reaction of press is assessed early, and is regarded as crucial: 'they are there at the beginning' we were told. Some decisions – such as the rejection of Tomlinson's carefully prepared proposals for reform of post-16 qualifications[63] as 'foolhardy' – were attributed to press comment about the value of A Levels. John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders felt 'electoral tactics… have taken precedence over educational logic'.[64] There were few who welcomed the substantial increase in media influence. Witnesses from both sides of the political divide worried about the resulting 'sound-bite politics': an example quoted was the regular announcements of a crack-down on incompetent teachers. Another wondered whether policy was better when it was, in a striking phrase, 'under the red-top radar'. The media were divided, we were told, into those on the one hand that had to be respected and satisfied, and others (the *Guardian* and *Independent* were mentioned) that were regarded as 'hostile witnesses'. At the end of the day, though, access to the media is not a totally negative factor: one former adviser valued the way that it enabled a skilled politician to explain policies to voters stripped of jargon and complications.

Ministerial careers

4.16 The increased importance of the view of media may be linked to the requirements for a successful Ministerial career. This is not a criticism of individual Ministers. We were told of politicians who showed great convictions about the purpose and importance of education, and its ability to transform lives. For better or worse, decisions have to be made and examples of interventions that improved practice, faced up to interest groups or broke log-jams were quoted to us. The coming of Educational Maintenance Awards, the reform of Job Centres and the launch of GNVQs were given as examples that came from direct Ministerial intervention and insistence. However, we heard a widespread worry that the excessive turnover of Ministers affected their ability to make positive changes. Figure 2 (page 21) shows the declining duration of Ministerial office, especially of the Ministers of State described by one experienced politician as 'the people that do the real work'. A recent BBC programme noted that there had been six Home Secretaries in the past 12 years, and indeed four in the past four years.[65] A particularly powerful educational example was quoted to us, in the area of basic skills, which had been managed by 11 ministers in seven years. We were told that Ministers had to make a mark in their brief time – almost, in the words of one witness, to 'create a brand'. As a result, there is a premium on new initiatives and head-turning announcements, rather than building on the proposals and achievements of previous post-holders. This is worsened by the speed at which information is reaching the centre showing

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[62] In Shephard, G. (2000) *Shephard's Watch: Illusions of Power in British Politics* (Politico's)

[63] DfES (2004) *14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform* (Tomlinson Report) London: Stationery Office

[64] *Guardian* (2005b) Teachers Reject White Paper Proposals (Polly Curtis 23 Feb 2005)

[65] BBC (2010a) Great Offices of State: the Home Office, 11 February 2009

Let's remember the broad consensus that what matters overwhelmingly in improving standards is teaching and learning – what goes on in the classroom…

difficulties in the field. The two factors combine to create what has been called 'policy frenzy' – a tidal wave of initiatives, announcements and bills. There was a feeling that those in the field were exhausted at the constant announcements and policy changes, a feeling shared by the Cabinet Office report mentioned in our introduction. Interestingly, Kenneth Baker quotes a view that, after the turmoil of the 1988 Education Act, 'a really boring Minister, devoid of charisma, short on vision, is just what education needs'.[66]

4.17 Ministers claim urgency, and the need to drive the system to better performance. Michael Barber's view is worth quoting:

> *'On 3 July (1997), the White Paper was published to widespread acclaim although with an undertow of criticism that this would all mean too much change in too short a time. If the accusation was an excess of ambition, we pleaded guilty; after all, the education system we inherited patently suffered from a lack of it.'*[67]

David Blunkett added:

> *'So there we have it – the first White Paper of the new government, the largest consultation paper in many years on education, and the first major one for any Labour government – and we did it in nine weeks, which, even though I say it myself, is remarkable.'*[68]

The pace of this particular change was understandable – after all, the Labour Party had been out of power since 1979, and wanted to put its own ideas into action. However, the pace of change has not slowed. The frequent cry is that 'children have only one chance' – yet this cannot be a sound basis for hurried or poorly evidenced changes. Policy turbulence ignores the time needed for effective policy to work through. Take an example of the *Success For All* proposals of November 2002,[69] which required teacher training for all further education college staff within two years. If this professional development was to improve pedagogy, it would show in the results at the end of the 2005/06 academic year. In fact, college success rates did rise sharply – but interest had moved elsewhere, as the Department had by then experienced four different Secretaries of State. The issue of duration of office means not just that Ministers feel the need to create new policy directions: it leaves a position where a Minister is rarely around to take responsibility for the successes – or more significantly, failures – of chosen approaches. Estelle Morris's decision to step down when literacy targets were missed is an exception. When other failures – such as the disastrous implementation of Individual Learning Accounts – are revealed, those responsible for the launch are nowhere to be seen.

4.18 The desire to make a mark may explain the popularity of structural proposals – changes in the ownership, governance or management of schools and colleges – as against longer-term proposals to improve learning. Let's remember the broad consensus that what matters overwhelmingly in improving standards is teaching and learning – what goes on in the classroom, lab and workshop. Curriculum managers welcomed the work of John Hattie, which sifted through thousands of studies of teaching and learning to rank the approaches that are most effective.[70] One expert explained his focus on effective teaching and learning by telling us 'structural change

[66] Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years: My Life In Politics* (Faber and Faber)
[67] Barber, M. (2007) *Instruction to Deliver: Tony Blair, the Public Services and the Challenge of Delivery* (Politico's)
[68] Blunkett, D. (2006) *The Blunkett Tapes: My life in the bear pit* (Bloomsbury)
[69] DfES (2002b) *Success For All: Reforming Further Education and Training – Our Vision for the Future,* London: HMSO
[70] See Hattie, J. (2004) *Factors that influence Children's Learning – results from a study involving 500 meta-analyses* ESRC Seminar, Newcastle; and other Hattie references in our full bibliography.

makes very little difference'; another said 'everyone knows that stuff doesn't work'.[71] Structural change is not harmless: it can divert managerial attention from the service to the client. However, changes in structure are much quicker and more dramatic than, say, better maths teaching in primary schools, or improved feedback in construction teaching in colleges.

Progress and reform

4.19 We would not wish to suggest that our interviewees were hostile to policy change, or felt that there have been few improvements, or that the path since 1976 has been downhill. Areas of improvement that were welcomed included:

- increased access to higher education
- improving results at KS2 and KS4 – often to levels that were regarded as fanciful when established as targets
- enhanced capital spending for schools and colleges
- the emphasis on success rates (and especially retention) in FE, which had led to major improvements in achievement
- Educational Maintenance Awards – a reform which our witnesses saw as well supported by evidence, launched with effective trials and driven by the enthusiasm of ministers.

There was a particular welcome from those with a background in institutional management for the gains from local management of schools and colleges (LMS). A former primary head told us of her sense of freedom when decisions could be taken locally: more than one former college principal illustrated their support for local management with anecdotes about the problems of local authority control in areas such as premises maintenance, procurement, capital and recurrent budget planning, and industrial relations.

Select Committees

4.20 One bright spot on the political horizon was the work of Select Committees. They were established under Margaret Thatcher to provide, amongst other things, an alternative career path for MPs. Many of our witnesses spoke warmly of the work of the Committees, who enjoyed strong advisers and delivered balanced assessments unaffected by political allegiances or labels. However, there was a feeling that they were spectators to the policy development process. In our recommendations, we look to using this resource better.

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[71] An echo here of the health consultant telling the *Sunday Times* that the only thing restructuring generates is redundancy payments (ST 2010)

5. What the memoirs tell us

5.1 Politicians are at the top of the policy making progress, and so it is important to hear their view. We were lucky to have the opportunity to speak to two former Secretaries of State, but a complete coverage was not possible. We asked current Conservative shadow ministers for interviews, but they were unable to find time to meet us: this is regrettable, for a view of policy formation in embryo would have been fascinating. There is, however, a way to understand the political viewpoint that we were able to use – memoirs and diaries.

5.2 Political memoirs can provide a fertile source of evidence about the policy formation process, and give us an insight into the ministerial mind. Margaret Thatcher[72] and John Major devoted significant sections of their memoirs to the educational issues and decisions they faced, James Callaghan less so. A number of Secretaries of State published substantial accounts of their tenure in office.[73] Gillian Shephard's expanded a series of thoughtful lectures given at Queen Mary and Westfield College;[74] by contrast, John Patten's contribution was a poorly reviewed think-piece on the future of Conservatism.[75] David Blunkett's diaries[76] have a strongly personal feel, but give useful insights into how Whitehall works – 'especially the state within a state that is the civil service' said one reviewer. Although the politicians we read were very different people, most shared a strong commitment to education, and a determination to make a difference.[77]

The significance of Ruskin

5.3 It may be worth starting with a comment about James Callaghan's 1976 speech at Ruskin College. The three pages (out of 560) that his memoir devotes to this confirms that it marked a genuinely important watershed. It was not the first note of dissent about our educational performance – that had been provided by the Black Papers authored by Cox and Dyson in 1969.[78] Yet many of the features of the speech that Callaghan hoped would launch a Great Debate set trends for the later history of educational policy making. The most obvious was the involvement of the Prime Minister, giving views over the heads of 'experts' in the educational establishment. It is remarkable to consider how, at the time, this was considered controversial. The *Times Educational Supplement* wrote a condescending editorial asking for the debate to be conducted, in the words of Callaghan, by those who 'knew what they were talking about'. Also significant was the concern with the UK's international competitiveness, and the link between education and economic performance. Callaghan was the first of many to give credibility to complaints from business leaders about the quality of those coming out of the education system. The call for a basic national curriculum would also be a matter to be developed in the following years into a fully prescribed list of subjects, levels and topics. Lastly, those reading Callaghan's memoirs will note a suspicion that the educational establishment was delaying and obstructing the planned Great Debate.

Common sense at last

5.4 We looked at the memoirs to see what were the drivers for policy changes, and in particular the importance of evidence. The books we read described very significant changes in UK policy – the Ruskin speech, the Education Reform Act, the growth of nursery and pre-school education,

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[72] Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years* Harper Collins 1993; Major, J. (2000) *John Major: The Autobiography* (Harper Collins)

[73] Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years: My Life In Politics* (Faber and Faber); Young, D. (1990) *The Enterprise Years: A Businessman in the Cabinet* (Headline)

[74] Shephard, G. (2000) *Shephard's Watch: Illusions of Power in British Politics* (Politico's)

[75] Patten, J. (1995) *Things To Come: the Tories in the 21st Century* (Sinclair-Stevenson)

[76] Blunkett, D. (2006) *The Blunkett Tapes: My life in the bear pit* (Bloomsbury)

[77] Some did not. The index of Alistair Campbell's Diaries has no mention of education at all.

[78] Cox, C.B. and Dyson, A.E. (1971) *The Black Papers on Education* (London: David-Poynter)

the incorporation of colleges, TVEI, Grant Maintained Schools and City Technology Colleges, Welfare to Work, the creation of a new university sector from former polytechnics and many more. The process of policy formation tended not to involve careful balancing of evidence from respected academic sources, or major public bodies. We noticed an inclination for Ministers to see changes and solutions as obvious, the application of a straightforward common-sense insight that they brought to matters. This reflects not just clear ideology – that choice and competition, transparency, or business techniques or central control must be applied to the problem at hand – but also a degree of self-belief of politicians, a factor that was also noted by our interviewees, many of whom had spent time working closely with Ministerial colleagues. Confidence is, of course, essential to an effective career in most areas, not least politics, but the frequent impression from memoirs is that some former Ministers felt their insights had at last brought some rationality to a previously neglected or badly run area. They may feel that common sense tells us that 'you need a sixth form to attract good teachers' when work from the DfES itself suggests 11–16 schools get better GCSE results and higher staying-on rates than equivalent 11–18 schools;[79] or that 'more competition will improve standards' when research suggests that it doesn't.[80] Gillian Shephard recalls Michael Heseltine telling an audience of councillors that planning appeals take too long. 'They are indeed complex' he said, 'some of them took me an hour and a half to decide.' Margaret Thatcher writes of her support for grant-maintained schools out of 'my instinctive preference for smaller schools rooted in real local communities and… reliant on their own efforts and energies.'[81] David Blunkett goes so far as to challenge the idea of politics as rational calculus. In his diaries he notes 'I am making a lot of judgements by instinct, just by feeling in my guts whether the information being given to me stands up. Much of politics is like this. People expect it to be scientific and clinical, but it isn't.'[82]

Anecdotal evidence

5.5 If conventionally defined research was not common, we learn that politicians are often struck by what was learned on visits or in conversations. One recent Home Secretary told the BBC: 'briefs from civil servants are OK, but nothing beats hearing it out on the street'. We heard of many politicians in education who were eager to talk to those in the field – going back to Sir Keith Joseph, Kenneth Baker, Kenneth Clarke and David Blunkett. Gillian Shephard, when Agriculture Minister, set up quarterly meetings with farmers in her constituency to find out what was going on, as she saw it: the move was unpopular with her civil servants as she returned to her Department with lists of questions and problems. International visits provided examples of success that might be transferred – one, in the words of Lord Young after a visit to Israeli vocational schools, a visit that 'changed my life' and later led to City Technology Colleges and TVEI. Individual Learning Accounts started their life as an idea of the Clinton Democrats, and was adopted for the UK by New Labour. Closer to home, favoured local authorities (like Wandsworth for Thatcher) or headteachers are used as sounding boards. But Ministers and advisers would increasingly meet individual headteachers or academics without the presence – whether moderating or foot-dragging – of a departmental adviser or senior HMI. This can lead to the uncritical use of anecdotal and partial evidence by Ministers.

5.6 The lack of an expert adviser may explain why some passages in memoirs reveal a misunderstanding of what was happening. Lord Young instituted the WRNAFE process we

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[79] Smith and Street *Analysis of Secondary School Efficiency; final report* DfES Research Report 788

[80] Stephen Gibbons, Stephen Machin, Olmo Silva (2006) *Competition, Choice and Pupil Achievement* Centre for Economics of Education LSE – which looked at London primary schools but quotes other research to the same end.

[81] Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years* (Harper Collins)

[82] Entry for November 2002

described earlier, and plainly felt that the issue of aligning technical education with labour market needs was settled.[83] Kenneth Baker's memoirs have a passage which claims credit for funding further education via a voucher system,[84] which puzzles those in that sector.

The view of the field

5.7   We also noted the opinion politicians have of what might be called the educational establishment. Some civil servants and educationalists are spoken of warmly, and some sections regarded as more effective than others. Nevertheless, there is a nagging feeling amongst politicians that the education interests can be self-serving – almost cartels working against the public interest. Callaghan suspected that they were, in his words 'pulling at the coat tails' of Shirley Williams, his Education Secretary. Lord Young entitles his chapter on TVEI as 'A Dawn Raid On Education'. Kenneth Baker speaks of 'narrow, selfish and bigoted' trade union leaders who refused to engage with 'the central issue of raising the standard of education – it was always more pay for less work'. He viewed their 'close – indeed cosy' relation with the Department as 'part and parcel of the culture of the educational establishment that had reigned since the 1960s'. John Major felt that teachers and schools were saddled with 'a complacent and bureaucratic department, which seemed to have a mania for expanding its authority and influence'. David Blunkett reports that 'even after a year and a half we are still struggling to link reality outside the Department with decisions inside it'. One well placed source we spoke to felt that sometimes those working in a public service 'just want to be left alone' and unaccountable. We have, of course, seen earlier that there is some evidence for this belief. It was interesting to contrast the evidence given to us about nursery vouchers by witnesses from the Labour and Conservative side. The Tory administration introducing nursery vouchers was told that the proposal was disruptive or unworkable; that there would be no demand or too much. The incoming Labour ministerial team trying to remove them were told it could not be done at all quickly, and felt they were being obstructed. Similarly, opponents of the literacy hour first of all said it would not work, then that it only worked by displacing other activity.

Think tanks and advisers

5.8   The feeling of being pitted against an educational cartel explains the influence of think tanks and political advisers outside the establishment. Think tanks have had considerable influence on both political parties. The Centre for Policy Studies had, after all, been established by Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph to develop her 'instincts into either a coherent framework of ideas or set of practical policies for government'. The CPS continues to influence Conservative policy, recently launching a debate on next steps in institutional independence.[85] The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) served a similar role for New Labour. The general secretary of the Fabian Society acknowledged: 'In opposition the IPPR acted, in effect, as a civil service for Labour'.[86] The links were especially strong in education. Baroness Blackstone was the chair of trustees from its launch until she became an education minister in 1997. David Miliband was head of education at the IPPR before moving to Tony Blair's office, and the next post-holder, Nick Pearce, advised David Blunkett on lifelong learning before the election. The IPPR supported ideas such as a University for Industry, Individual Learning Accounts and HE fees. Demos, another left-leaning group, developed ideas on inclusion and civic learning.

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[83] *The Enterprise Years*, pp 109–113
[84] Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years: My Life In Politics* (Faber and Faber) p. 246
[85] Burkard, T. and Rice, S.T. *School Quangos – a blueprint for abolition and reform* CPS 13, August 2009
[86] Slater, J. 'Where Tony's Ideas are Hatched' *THES Magazine* 15 Jan 1999

5.9 Ministers valued political advisers very highly. Sometimes advisers do not have a long background in the policy area concerned: we considered whether they should be subject to a formal appointment process, perhaps involving Select Committee or Civil Service scrutiny. However, Ministers clearly feel that they need someone on their side in what can be adversarial discussions. This is illustrated by an anecdote from Chris Mullins, who tells in his Diaries how John Reid, when Labour Party chairman, told MPs that 'There are half a million civil servants and 70 or 80 special advisers. The fact is that these are our people. Our people' he repeated.[87] Perhaps the abrasion between permanent civil servants and political advisers is inevitable – and if open debate is valued, even useful in testing the worth of ideas.

[87] Mullins, A. (2009) *View from the Foothills* (Profile)

6. Some conclusions

6.1 What conclusions can be drawn from pulling together the evidence we collected from academic literature, from interviews and from reading political memoirs, and what reflections did the project team have on what was found?

Is there a gap?

6.2 The most important question to resolve is this: have we found that policy making takes insufficient account of evidence? The answer we have found is broadly, yes. The widest gap between evidence and action seems to occur in the post-16 sector, where policies on skills, funding and structures run counter to what evidence and research tells us, and curriculum choices change from year to year. In other areas, we have seen great enthusiasm for policies for which evidence is at best mixed – for example, academies and free schools, and reading recovery. We found that the distance between evidence and policy seems to grow the longer a government is in power. The Obama administration in the USA is keen to have evidence-based policy. Tony Blair was famously interested in 'what works'. We heard of good practice by both parties whilst preparing for office: meeting those in the field, looking at good international comparisons, making careful choices of priorities. This may explain why, as one of our witnesses told us, 'the 1997–2001 direction seemed to work'. It is almost as if, as the grind of government wears on, the regard for evidence or discussion weakens: comment becomes an attack on what you're doing. The influence of the advisers and think tanks that explored options as politicians prepared for power fades. Ministers change; they take decisions or launch initiatives based on their idea of common sense, to make a headline or avoid negative media coverage. This may be linked to a desire to show media and electorate that there are still plenty of new ideas on offer, and that the government is not 'running out of steam'. A particular worry, which we mention below, is ignoring or attacking reports and studies with conclusions that suggest policies are mistaken or ineffective. The reaction to negative evidence is an important topic: the sensitivity of politicians to adverse news may reflect the fact that, as we heard at our seminar, 'evidence is more often used to destabilise policy than support it'.

How things are: the media

6.3 Some of our other findings seemed to be part of the modern world. It is easy to criticise an obsession with media, and a desire to present policy to look its best, but for better or worse, there are now more media outlets, and faster information dissemination, than in the early years we studied. 24-hour news channels seize on a story – missed school targets, a critical inspection report – feeding political opponents with ammunition, and demanding ministerial responses. This leads to an increased emphasis on managing news from the government side – what has come to be known as spin. The use of websites and blogs have an effect, giving short-term and individual opinions about policy; whereas good practice would seem to demand balanced evidence (taking data from a representative sample) and long-term assessments. There is a sense that popular culture and the media emphasise the personal, whereas evidence is about generalisation – altogether less glamorous. A story about a 12-year-old boy fathering a child is more dramatic than the fact that teenage pregnancy is falling. It was striking how many of our witnesses, unprompted, expressed concerns about the 'sound-bite politics' that has grown up in response to this world.

How things are: MIS

6.4 We have also noticed the significance of the way that IT-based reporting provides central government with large quantities of almost current information about the successes and failures of

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the education system: one senior source attributed much hasty policy to the simple presence of computers. This factor is likely to become more, not less, pervasive, as administrative databases get better, and glitches are removed. It is important to stress that getting more timely information is not a problem, but an opportunity. The private sector is well ahead of government in 'data mining' – there are some educational databases (like the further education Individualised Learner Record) that offer enormous potential for research and policy. And as with the influence of new media, the presence of computerised management information is here to stay. Their influence will not be affected by a modest report like our own; but it is clear that those responsible for the system and its policy choices are having to work with the challenges they create as they look for long-term and coherent strategies.

6.5 Other aspects of the problem are part of our particularly British political system. A contributor at our expert seminar told us that some countries – such as Germany – forbade politicians from intervening in the curriculum. This was a formal limit to a power that could be open to abuse and attractive to dictatorship.[88] Britain does not however have a written constitution of the sort that would create 'no-go' areas for the current government: indeed, one can argue that there should not be such a prohibition. A look at the reaction to the Ruskin speech suggests that in the past education was too secret a garden. It is extraordinary to learn, for example, that Bernard Donoghue, the political aide who helped write that speech, was given a dressing down by the Chief Inspector of Schools for his temerity. The performance of the education system is central to individual opportunity, to the arts, citizenship and to an efficient economy: it cannot be off-limits to those we elect to run our country.

The decline of expertise

6.6 However, policy interventions should be measured and supported by the facts. Many of our interviewees perceived a reduction in the use of experts and academic educationalists, and an increase in the power of political advisers. They claimed that the pendulum has swung too far against expertise, with those expressing caution at (for example) the reliance on academies/free schools, or the structure of the Diploma being regarded as opposition to be subdued, rather than witnesses to be interrogated. The habit of 'rubbishing' independent reports that cast doubt on some aspects of government policy or performance – as in the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2009), with its 28 surveys of relevant research and 42 pages of recommendations – is an aspect of this habit.[89] Remember too, the decline of the Royal Commission approach, and the preference for a speedy and focused report, often from a business leader. In some areas we felt that the increased use of expert panels might be helpful to government, depoliticising areas in much the way that Sir Ron (later Lord) Dearing's recommendations eased the introduction of higher education fees and the introduction of the national curriculum. However, the main argument for weighty commissions as against short sharp business reports will lie in the quality of recommendations, and the ability of consultation to win over those who have to implement changes.

Policy turmoil

6.7 As it is, we have a fast and turbulent policy world. There was agreement that the sheer volume of legislation – what one of our witnesses claimed was an Act every year – was truly unhelpful. It is not just that the pace of change leaves those charged with implementation confused and weary. We were told of policies that were introduced one year only to be undone soon after. The Strategic Area Reviews demanded in 2003 were made irrelevant by the DfES's

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[88] A limitation that looks understandable in the light of the news that the Texas Education Board is to change its history curriculum to include favourable references not just to Ronald Reagan and free market economics, but also to the National Rifle Association: mention of Roosevelt's New Deal will be reduced (*Times* 12 March 2010)

[89] A particularly sad aspect of this reaction was the distortion of what the Cambridge Review was actually recommending. See www.primaryreview.org.uk, and Matthew Taylor's blog of 21 October 2009.

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Five Year Strategy in 2004. Nursery vouchers were introduced, then abolished. Arguments for a looser national curriculum were rejected before being implemented. Academic 16–18 work was pooled into specialist sixth form colleges, only for new sixth forms to be launched a few years later. Tomlinson's arguments for a broader 16–18 curriculum were rubbished, yet Diplomas were announced three years later. Learning Accounts were launched and abolished: FE franchising was encouraged then banned. Management information requirements, once the job of a small team in the FEFC, are now implemented by two separate quangos. College management training was removed to an independent agency, only to be reintegrated with another a few years later. One very well connected witness told us that he no longer understood the structure of advisory bodies in post-16 education, 'and if I can't, how can the average employer or parent?'. A college principal spoke of working through seven different funding regimes in 15 years, where 'number 6 looked awfully like number 2'. This looks like a climate of confusion rather than urgency.

6.8 This is not a party political point. In 1993, Professor Anthony King complained in *The Daily Telegraph* about a Conservative Government which had added to its Education Bill 278 amendments during the House of Commons committee stage, a further 78 during the report stage, 258 during the House of Lords committee stage, 296 on report and 71 at the third reading. Did any of this make the slightest difference to educational achievement, he asked, and then answered his own question 'almost certainly not'. We were governed, King complained, 'by an entire tribe of hyperactive children'.[90] This happened when the Conservatives had been 14 years in power, giving support perhaps for our suggestion that governments pay less attention to consultation and evidence the longer they stay in power.

6.9 Interviews and literature suggest that the rate of change in education policy differs between sectors. Primary education has been subject to rapid but apparently consensual change. Higher education has not been immune – see the fee debate – but has suffered less policy churn than the secondary and further education sectors. By contrast, one of our experts claimed that the adult education service has been subject to more change in the UK than in any other country in the world. This may reflect the lobbying power of the various interests: as one of our contributors said, 'the Russell Group can get to Number Ten weekly – I doubt whether FE colleges that offer HE get in once a year'.

Going to the top
6.10 The increased politicisation of decisions was mentioned earlier. We have noted the decision on ESOL funding for asylum seekers. Another example was quoted to us concerned how to teach reading. It is entirely appropriate for a politician to demand that primary school leavers have improved reading skills. This was behind the urgency that David Blunkett and Michael Barber brought to the literacy programme on 1997. But whilst politicians can shape ends, means are another matter. It is unlikely to be helpful for them to support one technique – whether phonics or for reading recovery – against another.

6.11 Decisions taken at the top are more difficult to withdraw, and make it harder to admit failure. 'Ministers were very conscious of the need not to appear to do a U-turn' one witness told us. This may explain the practice of dismissing reports that draw attention to policy or implementation weakness. Recent examples to have suffered this treatment include well-researched and substantial reports on the effectiveness of homework,[91] on literacy and numeracy in primary

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[90] Quoted in Vernon Bogdanor 'What makes a successful democratic government?' *THES* 24 September 2004
[91] Farrow, Tymms and Henderson (1999) 'Homework and Attainment in Primary Schools' *British Educational Research Journal,* Vol. 25, Issue 3, June 1999, pp 323–341

schools,[92] and on the organisation of 16–18 curriculum delivery.[93] It might also cast light on the anticipatory claiming of results, as when the Secretary of State declared Diplomas a success before a lesson had been taught, or student enrolled.

6.12 We noted that evaluations after the event are nowadays much more common than assessment before policy adoption. Evaluation of effects, results and costs is of course crucial to good policy practice, but it has severe weaknesses. Consultants wishing to gain a continuing share of departmental research money will be reluctant to criticise a cherished programme: indeed, it is common for a draft report to be discussed and amended before publication. Even then we saw cases where Ministers quoted selectively from evaluations to put a much more favourable light on matters than could be sustained from a full reading. We were told that one reason that international – and especially American – evidence was sought was that there was little predictive research that could inform UK practice, which is partly due to the end of local initiatives and partly due to the allocation of research funds. Remember too the criticisms of the availability of useful research made by some of our practitioners in para 2.17 – a topic we will return to in our recommendations.

Management language

6.13 Many of our contributors viewed with distaste the language of management consulting that is nowadays used to analyse educational practice. The Nuffield 14–19 Review[94] speaks of an 'Orwellian language of 'performance management and control' (that) has come to dominate educational deliberation and planning – the language of measurable 'inputs' and 'outputs', 'performance indicators' and 'audits', 'targets' and 'curriculum delivery', 'customers' and 'deliverers', 'efficiency gains' and 'bottom lines'. Even *The Economist*[95] complained about the use of consultants who 'have frequently left devastation in their wake and have treated the public sector as dumping grounds for airy-fairy ideas such as 'transformation' that have been rejected by the private sector. They have built overly elaborate management structures that make it harder for people to do their jobs. And they have demotivated people who like to feel that they are working for the public good.' All professions suffer from jargon, and education suffers more than most from impenetrable acronyms. There seems however a strong case for explaining changes that aim to improve outcomes for students in simple language, and implement them through simple structures.

[92] Alexander, R. (ed.) (2009) *Children, their world, their education* (The Cambridge Primary Review)

[93] Pring, R. *et al* (ed.) (2009) *Education for All: The Future of Education and Training for 14–19 Year Olds* (Nuffield 14–19 Study Final Report) Routledge

[94] Pring, R. *et al* (ed.) (2009) *Education for All: The Future of Education and Training for 14–19 Year Olds* (Nuffield 14–19 Study Final Report) Routledge

[95] *The Economist* 'The Tale of Mr Jackson', 21 Jan 2010

… ideology should be in its proper place – informing aims and desired results, not methods.

7. Some recommendations

7.1 We therefore arrive at a position where a consensus of our contributors is that policy is introduced too quickly, and some of it takes too little account of evidence and expertise. We have not looked at policy areas outside education, but imagine that some of our findings will ring a bell in a wider forum. What then is to be done?

A policy path

7.2 Our first recommendation is one that extends beyond education to the wider political sphere – that there should be a common and planned process of policy formation. It should have specified stages from forming ideas to running and assessing pilots; indicate the evidence that supports the chosen approach; contrast alternative approaches with a given budget; list clear goals and success criteria; make clear when evaluation will happen, and how it will be published; call for evidence and put in place consultation; and set the date for an over-arching review. Such an approach could generate a rolling programme of policy creation and review, avoiding the danger of flooding the practitioners with simultaneous reforms. It was, after all, a politician who told us that 'the weakest part of the system is policy initiation'. It would increase the chances of effective policy making, and would protect the Government from the demands for knee-jerk responses to issues.

Values should determine goals, not methods

7.3 Our next point is that ideology should be in its proper place – informing aims and desired results, not methods. It may be that markets, or perhaps planning, delivers lower costs or higher quality. One style of literacy teaching may show significant advances over another; a reading hour may or may not be a good idea. Streaming or integration may raise standards; selective or comprehensive systems may encourage staying on. The point is to see what the evidence says, rather than (with echoes of Lysenko) make methodology an article of faith. There is an argument that taking decisions about educational approaches one step removed from ministers might work to the advantage of politicians. David Blunkett recognises in his Diaries[96] that 'sometimes you can be so hands on that… it looks like you're too closely associated with what's going wrong'. An example was quoted to us by an interviewee: 'it was now difficult for Labour to move away from the 50% HE target though it was not evidence based in the first place.' Our approach would allow tough decisions to be linked to expert advice, and failed experiments or pilots to be abandoned without affecting personal reputations. It is an approach that has worked elsewhere – as in the privatisation of telecoms and steel, or the independence of the Bank of England.

An educational NICE?

7.4 But if we are to urge politicians and senior civil servants to use the best research evidence when shaping policy, we must ensure that there is a supply of such evidence. We have seen that at least some of our interviewees – tellingly, those who were in policy making positions – spoke of the difficulty of finding appropriate evidence, often contrasting the position in education with their experience elsewhere in government. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example, provides expert analysis for those concerned with budgetary issues. Even those who argued that we have a good pool of useful evidence felt that there was an issue of access and communication. We support the creation of a body analogous to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in health care, a powerful advisory body, backed by expert researchers, to screen and recommend cost-effective policies. Such institutions exist in countries like Australia (NCVER), Germany (BiBB)

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[96] Blunkett, D. (2006) *The Blunkett Tapes: My life in the bear pit* (Bloomsbury)

If research evidence tells us anything, it is that improvements in educational standards come from better teaching and learning rather than structural change.

and France (CEREQ). By UK standards they are quite large, well staffed, reasonably independent of government, and able to commission research and work with academics and others with a relatively high degree of autonomy. However, a new body would not solve every argument between experts and government – the recent history of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs tells us that[97] – but it would place the debate on a rational foundation. The Secretary of State could, of course, reject advice, but we would favour a note of explanation when that happens. The new Commission could also work with the Department and Research Councils to create a list of priority areas for research. We have seen the number of bodies already in existence seeking to bring evidence and policy closer together. They could participate in creating a shadow commission, with the help (if necessary) of private sector funding, to work for a preparatory period to learn how best to feed evidence into educational policy formation.

Helping school and college leaders

7.5 Such a body would not just inform Ministers. It would also be of use to institutions struggling to find and embed best practice – for example, to understand what is the best way to improve numeracy, or reduce wastage. The pace of structural change makes it more difficult for heads and principals to stay abreast of research – 'they've taken away our thinking time' said one. As a result, schools and colleges can leap to enthusiasms, which later prove to be poorly evidenced; practice can be as dislocated from evidence as policy.[98] It is important for schools and colleges to stay abreast of best practice. If research evidence tells us anything, it is that improvements in educational standards come from better teaching and learning rather than structural change. Michael Barber tells us that 'research showed that the biggest influence of the system on pupil performance was the quality of teaching'. This is not to deny that structural reform can also be evidenced – the recent enthusiasm for the opening of small sixth forms, for example, is hard to justify from what we know about results, costs and inclusion.[99] However, as we noted earlier (para 4.18), there is a danger that the educational policy debate gets obsessed with structure – partly because existing educational providers and senior managers are vigilant to secure their positions against possible rivals. It also seems that the focus of leadership in the world of New Public Management tends to be on generic management issues – funding, growth, human resources issues, marketing and public relations – rather than learning effectiveness. One positive effect of an advisory body on educational good practice and a calmer policy environment would be to refocus the work of school and college leaders on the student experience – echoing Prof. Frank Coffield's 2008 lecture 'Just Suppose Teaching and Learning Became the First Priority…'[100] There is an echo here of recent criticism of the NHS management system where 'the risk of consequences to managers is much greater for not meeting the expectations from above than for not meeting expectations of patients and families'.[101]

An idea whose time has come?

7.6 During the preparation of this report, we have been taken aback by the number of other bodies and speakers who have come to a similar conclusion about the desirability of a body that will present evidence for policy and practice. Two national movements – the Coalition for Evidence Based Education and the Strategic Forum for Research in Education – are expected to be making public statements during the spring/summer about the idea of an Evidence Centre for Education.

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[97] The argument about drug advice has had a beneficial consequence, in that attention is being given to how government should react to scientific advice. One suggestion is that Ministers respond to – though, of course, not necessarily act on – any expert advice received from advisory bodies.

[98] Remember the enthusiasm in schools and colleges for approaches that used team teaching or learning styles, which ebbed when experts pointed out the paucity of backing for such constructs. See Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E. and Ecclestone, K. (2004) *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning – A systematic and critical review* LSRC and the Hattie analyses in our full bibliography. For team teaching see Hattie references in our full bibliography.

[99] See Fletcher, M. 'Sixth Sense', *Guardian* 24 October 2006

[100] Coffield, F. (2008) *Just Suppose Teaching and Learning Became the First Priority*. London: LSN

[101] Institute of Health Care quoted in *Sunday Times* 'Labour hid ugly truth about NHS' 7 March 2010

A healthcare expert told a recent education conference that 'medical research is at the heart of cost-effective innovation in healthcare … but there is no such research culture in many other public services. Research into areas like re-offending, preventing anti-social behaviour and better teaching practices could result in huge social and economic benefits for the taxpayer but there is no national public service forum or board in which research expertise in health can be shared with other services. Without this, some public services will remain in the dark ages.'[102]

Chief Officer

7.7 The role of an educational advisory body might be strengthened by the appointment of a single person as Chief Education Officer, analogous to the Chief Medical and Veterinary Officers already in place.[103] Such an appointment could provide the Government with balanced advice, tempering the latest enthusiasm of the press or political parties. It would redress the concern about the lack of expertise evidenced by the loss of HMI advice and the focus on delivery under new public management. The experience of Select Committees shows that it is possible to provide good advice and detached analysis – the issue is to place it closer to the heart of government. We see a continuing role for Select Committees, and would wish to increase their power. Interestingly, the House of Commons Reform Committee has recently asked for a strengthened role. 'Select Committees need to have their output linked through debate and dialogue into the overall system for holding government to account as it proposes new legislation, the allocation of public money and new, and we hope evidence-based, policies.'[104] We agree, and see Select Committees as central to an agreed, rational policy development process, involving consultation and review before adoption as much as conducting reviews afterwards. The supporting evidence for a change should be interrogated, and agreed success criteria established before implementation.

Evaluation

7.8 'Any research needs to be clear that there is policy and there is what is happening' said one worldly witness. However, a number of our witnesses told us there was not a sharp divide between policy and practice. Implementation can determine the effect and success of policy: more than one of our witnesses felt Individual Learning Accounts, to take one example, were a good idea that had been betrayed by its implementation. We were told at our seminar – and it is almost a truism – that 'it is pointless to have policy unless it affects practice, and improves children's lives'. David Blunkett echoed this in our interview: he told us 'if I had my time again I would look to a monitoring unit to see whether the policies we have passed are having an effect on the ground'. This makes evaluation important. We have argued that it should be balanced with a greater emphasis on trials and pilots, but it clearly has a role. We must ensure that it is open and independent – indeed, there is a case for it to be commissioned outside the Department (perhaps via our NICE group) to avoid the problems mentioned earlier. All evaluations should be published, with Departmental response where appropriate.

A search for consensus

7.9 The argument against such a balanced and measured approach to policy formation – expert advisers, consultation, due process – is always the need for urgency. We have recognised earlier – in our discussion of primary literacy – the benefits of urgent action where merited and followed through. There is a danger, though, that the demands of urgency can be exaggerated, and lead to confusion and wasted resource. The important factor in policy is implementation, which takes years. It should be possible, given our system with more evidence and longer time spans, to seek a greater degree of consensus between the political parties, taking much of education out of the

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[102] Professor Jonathan Shepherd at Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) conference in London, 7 March 2010

[103] John Dunford, the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, originally put forward this idea.

[104] House of Commons Reform Committee (2009) First Report of Session 2008–09, *Rebuilding the House*, HC 117.

There appear to us large areas – higher education, apprenticeship, early years – where there is no political disagreement between the major parties…

adversarial political arena. There appear to us large areas – higher education, apprenticeship, early years – where there is no political disagreement between the major parties (especially now the Liberal Democrats have abandoned their planned abolition of fees). In other areas – such as local management of schools – the differences are small and exaggerated. To take an obvious example quoted by our interviewees – the ferocity of past Labour opposition to City Technology Colleges and Grant Maintained Schools seems odd when placed with New Labour's enthusiasm for academies, specialism and sponsorship. The recent difficulties in seeking consensus on funding the care of the elderly – plainly an area where the nation needs a consistent, long-term policy – is a sad reflection of the difficulty of finding shared ground in an adversarial political system. We still feel, though, that in education, the search for common ground offers us more than the desire for 'clear blue water'. Even the pugnacious Kenneth Baker felt in his 1993 memoirs that the 'education system needs a period of calm consolidation. Education will never be stripped of controversy, but it should be stripped of party polemics'.[105]

7.10 We mentioned earlier how public choice economics, led by Nobel laureate James Buchanan, had been a factor in the pro-market consensus. It's interesting, then, to note that Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate from a different school, used economic analysis to discover 'why so many government decisions were so bad' and 'why it was so often difficult for politicians to introduce policies which ought to be uncontroversial'. His answer, like ours, is to increase 'transparency, explanation and consensus building'.[106]

Focused research

7.11 We have noted the controversial assertion from several of our witnesses that little of current educational research seemed useful to policy makers. One spoke of politicians working 'in the dark' to find solutions – particularly troubling when the tide of information about the system's failures is washing in. We recognise the importance of the role of specialised research centres, established to work on priority areas for educational policy, for example the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), the Centre for Economics of Education (CEE), and the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL). We were also encouraged to learn of the work of the Strategic Forum for Research in Education, led by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Education Research Association (with the support of CfBT Education Trust and DCSF) in examining the state of the research system in the UK. That there were still doubts, expressed by those we talked to, as to the availability of relevant research for policy development, points to the potential for aligning these developments better. Our educational NICE recommendation would aid this effort, possibly through a 'clearing house' function where evidence is assessed for rigour and directed to influence policy and practice. What is needed is an evidence-rich field, where there are no worries from senior academics about the availability of funds to research key issues, nor complaints from civil servants and politicians about the lack of usable evidence, nor attacks by politicians on respectable research reports.

Bringing research and evaluation together

7.12 We were interested in the complaint from several witnesses that evaluation after implementation was overfunded in relation to the resourcing pilots and exploratory research before policy was adopted. It was difficult to disagree with the witness who thought it was extraordinary that there was no funding to investigate (for example) better ways of teaching Maths and English. We noted also the worries about the integrity of the evaluation process – changing drafts, selective quotation, publication or

[105] Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years: My Life In Politics* (Faber and Faber) p. 473
[106] Quoted in Coyle, D. (2007) *The Soulful Science: what economists really do and why it matters* (Princeton)

non-publication, the pressures on consultants caused by the desire for follow-up work. There seems to be a case for rebalancing, and reshaping the whole balance here. We recommend that funds for evaluation are placed in the same pot as funds for research, and allocated by the same process. We also recommend a transparent system of publication and dissemination of pilots, research and evaluation. The DCSF website is an example of good practice here, publishing important work in a set timescale: the output of studies commissioned by quangos is more difficult to find.

Working together

7.13   One of our politically engaged witnesses felt that those collecting evidence need to understand the political as well as information needs of those in power. This means recognising that research evidence can be politically controversial, and finding ways to warn or advise those responsible about the emerging conclusions.[107] A sharp report may gain some press headlines, but is essentially empty if it does not lead to any changes because those in power regard it as a hostile witness, out to get them. This does not require changing recommendations to fit prejudices as much as framing comments in a way that are helpful to those charged with getting results from the system. Maybe, as one of our contributors said, 'the issue is not to improve policy makers' use of research as much as researchers' use of politics'. It can be done. Keynes allegedly refused to 'talk nonsense, just because they won't listen to sense' but was nevertheless a consummate insider.

An award for well evidenced policy

7.14   We look, then, to a world where policy makers consult the research and evidence, and where researchers work collaboratively with the policy community. We therefore recommend the establishment of an annual prize for the best evidenced piece of policy – to be shared between the researchers who provided the evidence and the policy makers who took it on board.

Regrowth of professionalism

7.15   We welcomed the recent work of the Cabinet Office in reconnecting policy development with practice. This may be as simple as extending the use of consultation in policy introduction, though there is a danger there that many positive innovations – such as the transparency of inspection reports – would not have survived the opinions of those in the system. We noted the success of practitioners who had spent parts of their career in different sectors of the educational world – for example, as inspector, headteacher/principal, local government or quango officer, and/or civil servant. There may be a case for bringing these groups together more often, and for developing a more coherent approach to blended career paths.

International comparison

7.16   International comparison offers great potential for policy learning. There is, of course, a danger that, without careful analysis of all relevant factors, this becomes merely a form of plagiarism, devoid of important cultural and structural elements, and lacking the learning that comes from actually doing the work. We recommend a formal process of international learning, with key staff and events programmed to ensure we gain the greatest advantage from the work of colleagues in other administrations. We would also welcome increased use of evidence from the rest of the UK, and recommend the establishment of formal contacts between UK governments – including perhaps an annual conference under Chatham House rules to assess and pilot approaches to common problems. Consideration, too, should be made as to how best to learn from differing regional approaches within England.

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[107] There is an interesting echo here of Ibsen's *Enemy of The People,* where the local doctor is shunned when he tries to inform his town council that the water feeding their profitable spa is infected. In the Sheffield Crucible's current production, Anthony Sher plays him not as a simple hero, but someone who has difficulty getting his message across to those in power.

Simply adding another quango to a cluttered scene will do little to improve things.

8. Final remarks

8.1   Our recommendations form a substantial wish-list, and we are not so naïve as to think that the political community will rush to implement them all. Indeed, few of our recommendations would work unless they form part of a changing climate. Simply adding another quango to a cluttered scene will do little to improve things. We note in our text occasions when sound research and evaluation – whether on the primary school curriculum, the usefulness of low-level qualifications, the effectiveness of competition to raise standards, or the cost effectiveness of Train to Gain – already exists, and has been ignored. But we hope that our recommendations will fall alongside similar views from a wide variety of bodies and individuals. We feel that the zeitgeist may be working in our favour – certainly, reactions to our expert seminar and to early drafts gave us that confidence.

8.2   Our report looks to a future in which policy is developed in a studied and planned manner, drawing on existing research and commissioning new research when needed. It hopes for a greater dialogue with those whose task will be to implement and work within new systems. We recommend a clearer division of role between politicians and professionals, a clarification which we believe will improve relationships as well as policy. There is more work to be done – clarifying the international links, shaping the educational advisory commission, developing the protocols between policy makers and advisers. But the prize is substantial. We live in a competitive world, where education can raise skills and create wealth. We live in a diverse world, in which education can improve understanding. We live in a rapidly changing world, where education can increase knowledge. We live in an unequal world, where education can raise opportunity. We look to the engagement and support of our colleagues to help in that effort.

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