



Good Policy Making: What can we learn from past policies?

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March 2023

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the members of Edge's Emerging Researchers Network for reviewing the policy initiatives from the past: Dr Konstantina Maragkou (ESRI, Dublin), Karen Tatham (University of Leeds), Hannah Olle (University of Sussex), Dr Jo Burgess (Leeds University Business School), Libby Ford (Bath Spa University), Karen Tatham (University of Leeds), Alice Weavers (Kings College London), Liz Polding (University of Oxford) and Samantha Jones (Research College Group), our intern Samira Salam from Kings College London.

Reviews were received by experts with thanks to Dr Andrew Gunn (University of Leeds), Dr Helen Carasso (University of Oxford) and Professor Gareth Parry (University of Sheffield) and Dr Aunam Quyoum (Edge Foundation).

Thank you for our Edge colleagues, Olly Newton and Kat Emms, for your valuable feedback on early drafts.



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Reference as: Laczik, A., Dabbous, D., Patel, J. and Wilson, E. (2023). *Good Policy Making: what can we learn from past policies?* London: The Edge Foundation.

Introduction

The Edge Foundation has a long history of supporting and advocating for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and work-related learning at all levels. Our research projects have a broad focus on further education colleges, VET and those young people who opt for or are directed to vocational courses. All our research reports have implications for policy development.

Policy development is complex and context-specific. Policy memory often fades as experts retire. In VET, the expert population is ageing. However, a lack of policy memory can also arise as a consequence of the fast and frequent churning of personnel within the government and civil service, which tend to prioritise flexibility over expertise and does not allow the accumulation of policy expertise and knowledge. We consistently see many policy initiatives introduced, some of which resemble successful policies from the past while others recall doomed interventions. If we are to avoid repeating the same mistakes and understand why certain policies achieved their aims, it is important to revisit past policy initiatives and build our policy memory. Spending time reflecting on the past and learning from it will lead to improved policy making.

In February 2021 we launched our [Learning from the Past](#) series to stimulate reflection and fill the gaps appearing in policy memory, and to support good policy development. Over time we have revisited policy initiatives going back to the 1970s related to VET and other policies supporting disadvantaged young people making progress in their education and training. Each policy review was developed by [Edge's Emerging Researchers Network](#) members. Through these policy reviews, the early career researchers engaged with a past policy initiative of their interest in depth. These significant educational past policy initiatives in England have influenced and driven change across the education system and some of them even continue to exist in other parts of the UK and/or have re-appeared following the pandemic. By analysing how past policies were conceived, developed and implemented we aim to discuss the conditions in which good policy making might occur to improve the education and training system.

First, we should consider the different approaches to policy development processes.

Policy development

Policy learning is a concept that has generated considerable interest among researchers focusing on policy development, policy implementation and policy evaluation. Raffe and Spours (2012) define policy learning as *'the ability of governments, or systems of governance, to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience'* (p.1), and in relation to evidence and experience they refer to three types: learning from abroad (Alexander et al., 2000), learning from local innovations and experiments (Strategy Unit, 2003), and learning from previous experience (Olsen and Peters, 1996). The ways in which these policy development processes have been characterised is worth a short discussion.

Learning from abroad

Policy-makers have throughout history been fascinated by international examples, often looking for inspiration and good practice they have encountered abroad to solve local challenges. This very much remains the case today. In vocational education and training (VET), for example, there are numerous references to the German speaking countries (e.g. [employer led 'German style' FE system](#)) and the social dialogue that underpin their VET systems. There is also a tendency in many European countries and in England to consider the German dual VET system given Germany's relatively low level of youth unemployment, highly skilled workforce and economic success (Barabasch et al., 2009). However, given Germany's specific traditions and its different cultural, social, economic contexts, the German dual VET system cannot be transferred into another context without adjustment to the local context.

Policy development processes are often discussed in the context of comparative and international education. These processes could be thought of as 'policy borrowing', 'policy learning', 'policy transfer' and 'policy referencing' (Kersh & Laczik, 2021). These concepts and processes overlap and offer a helpful way of reflecting on what good policy making might mean in the English context. While policy learning offers a potentially good way forward when considering policy solutions from abroad, uncritical policy borrowing can be detrimental.

Policy borrowing versus policy learning

We talk about policy borrowing when a specific policy is transferred into a different context without considering the educational, political, economic and social environment, often across national borders. As early as 1900, an English historian, educationalist and university administrator, Michael Sadler gave a speech on 'How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?'. In it, he eloquently identified the essence of how policy borrowing can lead to *'the uncritical international transfer of educational policy and practice from one context to another'* (Crossley and Watson, 2009, p. 636):

In studying foreign systems of Education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing... (in Phillips, 1989).

The practice of policy borrowing has, more recently, been identified as a flawed policy such as that helpfully critiqued by Phillips and Och (2003). There is, however, a clear argument for policy learning (Raffe, 2011). Policy learning is more likely to lead to positive policy developments if the policy is tailored to the national context. There is also an argument for cross-national comparisons from within the four nations of the UK (Raffe and Spours, 2012) that Raffe (2012) calls '*home international*' comparison (p. 138). These national '*systems share certain UK-wide characteristics, and within this nexus of similarity and distinctiveness lie opportunities for mutual learning*' (Raffe and Spours, 2012, p. 210).

Policy learning has to be a conscious activity, stakeholders have to engage with the process to become 'effective' in order to lead to positive and impactful policies. Policy learning, as Raffe and Spours (2012) suggest, should be based on evidence. International examples of good practices, trials and pilot projects of policy initiatives, and successful or unsuccessful policy examples from the past can serve as a good basis to learn from.

Learning from trials and pilots

Trials and pilots are widespread ways in which the impact of policies can be evaluated as part of a 'phased' approach to implementation. In 2001, the Government Chief Social Researcher's Office set up a Review Panel with a range of experts from different backgrounds to shed light on '*the provenance, conduct and aftermath of policy piloting in a range of different circumstances*' (Jowell, 2003, p.1). It was led by Professor Roger Jowell and the findings were published in 2003. His work considers the implication of '*the phased introduction of major government policies or programmes allowing them to be tested, evaluated and adjusted where necessary, before being rolled out nationally*' (p. 3).

The Review Panel identified that the use of trailblazers and pilot programmes have been relatively widespread in education. Examples for pilots in England currently include developing occupational standards, T-levels, and historically have included the introduction of Education and Maintenance Agreement (EMA) (Jowell, 2003, p.22), or the 14-19 Diplomas using a '*Gateway process to assess proposals for early Diploma delivery*' (DCSF, 2007, p.3). Like all policies, education policies always have intended and unintended outcomes and impact. Through the evaluation of trials and pilots some outcomes and impact can be measured and tested, and by reflecting on their findings unintended negative outcomes may be eliminated and/or reduced. Pilots should help identify unavoidable flaws and these should be ironed out before regional and/or national roll out. However, as Jowell (2003) argues, time can be a limiting factor. Large scale, systemic policy change, however, takes years to bed in and deliver reliable and measurable impact. Simultaneously there are policies that are designed to have an immediate impact. Many of these could be observed during Covid-19, such as the National Tutoring Programme and Opportunity Guarantee measures, including the Kickstart Scheme. Jowel (2003) also identified that '*the persistence with which randomised policy trials continue to be embraced suggests that they are a highly valued and well-integrated policy aid*'. However, based on one of his case studies, he suggests that 'although [trials] have had considerable influence on operational issues, their influence on policy per se has been less pronounced' (p. 24). There are broadly speaking two different approaches to evaluate trials and pilot, qualitative and quantitative, and these are complementary approaches. '*What matters is rigour and fitness for purpose, not an a priori methodological preference*' (p. 16).

Jowel (2003) also reports on the potential dichotomy between '*the demands of the policy cycle on the one hand and rigorous evaluation on the other*' (p. 27) signalling tension between policy-makers and researchers. Policy-makers argue for evidence-based policy in both cases, prior as well as later/subsequent evidence. This opens up the question of time scale for the pilot and for the evaluation. It has been acknowledged by the respondents to the Review Panel that the findings of the evaluation of the pilots should be publicly available,

hence transparency has been advocated. However, there has been diverse views about the extent to which pilot results should *'be translated in advance of public release'* (p.28).

One of the recommendations of this Review Panel proposed a cross-departmental dialogue:

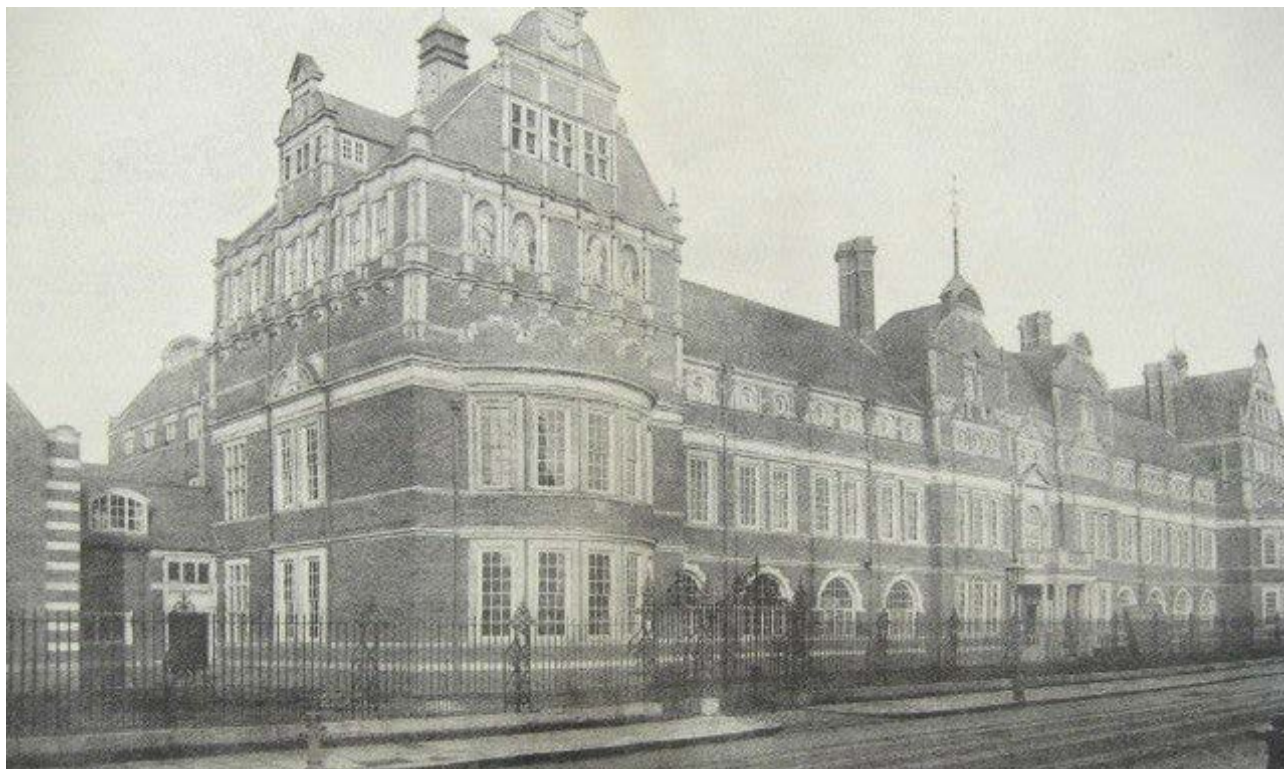
recommended the creation of a panel of enquiry to oversee an exchange of experiences between departments across UK administrations and to consider the future role of pilots (p.3).

While the quotation specifically refers to pilots, a cross-departmental dialogue among government departments about sharing their policy experiences in the broad sense would contribute to learning from each other's successes and failures and further support better policy making.

Learning from past experiences

Another way of developing policy learning is to review past fully- or partially-implemented successful or unsuccessful policy initiatives. Raffe and Spours (2012) have argued that despite the continued innovation in the 14-19 education system since the 1980s there is no evidence for a systematic evaluation of former models and there is no policy learning from past experience. Similarly, Keep (2020) argues that a series of past policy innovations aimed at urging employers to invest in education and training still have not changed employers' motivation and engagement with skills policy.

Why is there so little policy learning based on past experiences? This is a big question and there are many answers to it. However, one pre-requisite for policy learning, from international examples, pilots or trials or from past experiences, is that it is essential to develop good policy memory.



From policy amnesia to stimulation of memory

Policy learning has been widely investigated but policy amnesia is under-researched. In their research Stark and Head (2019) state that *'there was complete agreement that amnesia is a serious concern that undermines the performance of public policy and public administration'* (p. 1523).

Higham and Yeomans (2012) draws on three examples of 14-19 education reforms; the national curriculum and its assessment, the introduction of the 14-19 Diplomas, and placing employers 'in the driving seat' in the development of the Diplomas. They show that:

in each case they embodied diagnoses of perceived problems and proposed solutions that bore strong similarities to those which had gone before. Furthermore, we shall show that the justifications which were offered included no acknowledgements of earlier reforms and practices and therefore exhibited symptoms of policy amnesia (p. 35).

Watson (2011) highlights examples of policies from the higher education sector, such as the Foundation Degrees and endless examples of STEM initiatives that *'fails to be assessed against the history of the last time it was tried'* (pp. 410). He argues for 'institutional memory' and for civil servants staying in place for long enough to build up policy memory. Otherwise, how will they know *'what happened last time we tried this?'* (p. 413).

There is plenty of evidence for a busy policy arena across many areas in education; 14-19 education, vocational education and training, skills systems and higher education just to mention a few. Watson (2011) rightly labels this as an extraordinary 'legislative hyper-activity' (p. 411). There is significant evidence that lessons learnt from previous policy initiatives and implementation are either ignored or not acknowledged. As Stark and Head's (2019) have argued, policy amnesia is clearly of detriment to the development of good policy. More attention needs to be given to developing institutional policy memory.

The above discussion is a brief overview, but even this short introduction makes clear the importance of policy learning to policy development. We do not pretend to have developed a comprehensive analysis and presentation of what influences policy development. Instead, we aim to stimulate thinking and initiate a conversation about evidence-based good policy making.

The current series of Learning from the Past therefore does what it says on the tin. Each report revisits former policy initiatives to reinvigorate policy memory and suggests some lessons we can learn from them. Paying close attention to lessons learnt from the past that will contribute to better policy making.

Learning from the Past – policy reviews

We consider understanding previous policies, how they worked, what went well, and what challenges they faced, essential to developing and delivering good policy. Each of our Learning from the Past reviews focused on a specific historical policy. They offered a brief overview of the policy context at the time, summarised what went well, and identified the challenges the policy encountered. They drew parallels with current policy initiatives where appropriate. These reviews have been essential in helping us identify the guiding principles, building on and adapting the best ideas from the past to avoid repeating mistakes within policy formation in the future. This report aims to summarise these guiding principles that have emerged across the policy reviews within the Learning from the Past series.

We have mainly focused our policy reviews in three different areas: Vocational Education and Training (VET), policies that have supported disadvantaged groups of young people to engage and re-engage with education and training, such as young people Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET), and Higher Education (HE). Our range of reviewed policies in the series exemplify the interests both of Edge and our emerging researchers' network members. Each individual review report can be found in full on our [website](#). In this report, we revisit each report and provide a selection of key messages of each of the policies within the series, drawing out from each policy what worked and what did not, and what we can learn from them.



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The Connexions Service



Dr Konstantina Maragkou, Research Fellow, ESRI, Dublin

The Connexions Service, in operation between 2001 and 2012, aimed to support young people through the provision of impartial information, advice, and guidance (IAG) primarily around the landscape of post-compulsory (then post-16) educational routes. Connexions was one of the earliest attempts to provide support for young people, particularly those who were subject to exclusion from traditional sources of advice. This is particularly important for supporting social mobility as young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds might be less aware of opportunities available to them, providing these young people with all options suitable for them and enabling them to make informed decisions about their future.

Post-compulsory education pathways in the early 2000s were complicated, and remain so today.

In these spaces advice providers are essential in helping young people make decisions. One of the main problems identified with the IAG provided by Connexions was its inconsistency across England. It lacked clear vision of purpose and the outcomes they wanted to achieve. Young people in different parts of the country were given different IAG: some areas were more focused on vocational pathways while other areas were more likely to guide young people towards more traditional routes such as Higher Education. To deliver effective, holistic, easily accessible, and impartial IAG, advisory services need a clear vision of their purpose and the outcomes they want to achieve.

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Entry to Employment



Karen Tatham, Ph.D. student, University of Leeds

Entry to Employment (E2E) was in operation between 2002 and 2010. Its main purpose was to provide a work-based programme to support young people not ready for employment, apprenticeships, further education or training, with low or no qualifications and high social disadvantage. In areas where E2E worked well it was valued for the personalised pathway of support offered to young people. Positive relationships were built by committed professionals working one-to-one with young people who often had negative school experiences.

However, E2E was criticised for directing young people into lower skill, personalised training, rather than mainstream qualifications. Progression and qualifications were not central to E2E, which risked young people being trapped in low work no work cycles. Our review concluded that this was a result

of unhelpful top down pressure from policy to target and reduce the number of young people not in education employment and training. E2E reinforced occupational stratification in vocational routes. Employers were not sufficiently engaged in the work-based programmes and curriculum opportunities lacked the skills and work experience needed for jobs (Keep and James, 2012).

Although the scheme was successful into aiding young people's progression into work, the policy narrative underestimated the prior education, work experience and ambition of some young people. Greater focus is needed by programmes similar to E2E on local demand for labour, and how progressions and qualifications could support access to quality jobs for young people.

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New Deal for Young People (NDYP)



Hannah Olle, Ph.D. student, University of Sussex

The New Deal for Young People (NDYP) was launched by the Labour government across the UK in April 1998. It was a mandatory programme for young people aged 18 to 24 who had been unemployed and claiming Job Seekers Allowance for 6 months or more (NAO, 2002).

There are elements of the NDYP which were valued by young people. The NDYP's delivery indicated that young people valued having the input of a Personal Advisor (PA). They acted as a central point of contact for participants, providing assistance and support throughout all stages of the programme (NAO, 2002). A small £60 subsidy was offered to employers to employ a New Deal participant for at least 26 weeks, and this was successful in ensuring 60% of participants were retained.

The first four years of NDYP were supported by a strong job market and the programme showed to have a positive impact on youth unemployment. However, there were geographical variations

in success of the NDYP with the number of young people moving from the programme into employment being lowest in industrial cities with high unemployment and highest in more prosperous areas of the South East (Finn, 2003). The programme was less effective in placing young people with significant barriers to employment into jobs and consequently, some re-entered the programme two or three times.

The programme was most effective when it could be tailored to meet the specific needs of young people. As Maguire (2022) highlights, the evidence shows that offering a range of interventions is more effective than a 'one size fits all approach'. Therefore, whilst it might involve greater costs, a programme which provides a choice of provisions, and flexibility around support, is more likely to help young people into work.

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Young Apprenticeships Programme (YA)



Dr Jo Burgess, Postgraduate Researcher, Leeds University Business School

The Young Apprenticeships Programme was in operation between 2004 and 2012 and provided a vocational learning programme for 14-16 year olds in Key Stage 4. The programme was an ambitious policy initiative which provided significant opportunities for young people to specialise in a vocational area and experience work in their chosen occupation. It included vocational, academic and work-based learning, and emphasised partnerships between schools, further education, training providers, employers and local authorities.

The programme and its partnerships faced significant barriers which prevented it from achieving its full potential, including barriers to collaborative work in safeguarding, the division of income and differences in organisational and pedagogic cultures. According to a number of evaluations (Ofsted, 2007; YPLA, 2010; and IES, 2006, 2007) the partnerships within the Young Apprenticeships Programme varied in their approach to implementation. Both administrative and educational standards were diverse. However, where partnerships succeeded in negotiating these

issues, the results provided occupational experience and progression opportunities for young people. The Young Apprenticeship programme demonstrates the ability of key stakeholders to achieve a unified programme of study which develops academic, vocational and employment skills.

The Young Apprenticeships Programme also struggled with a lack of economies of scale and recruitment challenges and struggled to achieve parity of opportunity for diverse learners. The experience of the YA Programme in developing stakeholder relationships provides key lessons on how to facilitate collaborative working in other projects and purposes. A national pre-16 study programme which includes academic and vocational learning would require long-term commitment, and as the YA Programme demonstrates, strong partnerships and a requirement for national rather than localised, optional coverage.

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Technical and Vocational Education Initiative



Libby Ford, Ph.D. student, Bath Spa University

The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) running from 1983-1997 was intended to instil a significant element of vocational and technical education into the curricula of mainstream schools and colleges (Williams and Yeomans, 1994). Participation for local authorities was voluntary, whereby schools and colleges submitted proposals to be opted into the TVEI, and were given funding, based on the aims and criteria set out by the Manpower Service Commission (MSC) (Uzodinma, 1991). The initiative was offered as full-time courses, where students could start at age 14 and continue until 18.

The initiative has been praised for seeking to support the integration of vocational and technical education into the curriculum. Teachers were given TVEI-Related In-Service Training (TRIST) for the scheme, and the TVEI has been noted to have changed the teaching style of those who participated (Bradley 1986). The literature states that an important effect from the TVEI was the way it raised 'teachers' consciousness of the alternative purposes for education to the traditional liberal tradition' (Dale et al., 1992, p118).

However, it has also been subject to criticism, the TVEI scheme was poorly managed and lacked sufficient controls as to how the budgets were being spent and where the money was going (NAO 1991). The initiative was seen as failing to secure the coherent, skills-related curriculum that had been intended, and it has been argued that TVEI evaluators could not demonstrate that it had led to any improvements in preparation for work skills or attainment for individuals (Finegold, 1993; Richardson and Wiborg, 2010).

Since the end of TVEI there have been continuous policy initiatives and curriculum reforms in vocational education: General National Vocational Qualifications followed by National Vocational Qualifications in the early 1990s, Curriculum 2000, Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education, 14-19 Diplomas and Entry to Employment (2005), and more recently, T-levels.

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14-19 Diplomas



Samantha Jones, Research College Group

14-19 Diplomas (2008-2010) focused on combining general and vocational qualifications and were aimed at all students; from those considered disaffected or without the required 5 GCSEs at Grade C or above, to higher attaining students wishing to progress into skilled employment or university. Each diploma was comprised of three components: sector and subject-related knowledge determined in large part by employers; generic functional skills including ten days of work experience; and specialist learning for progression.

The complex structure and delivery of the 14-19 Diplomas raised a number of concerns. Delivering a complex qualification across a consortia of educational institutions resulted in IT, administration and transportation issues. Complicated and excessive assessment across the three components of learning was identified as a barrier to the students' completion (Ertl et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2011). Evaluations of the uptake and completion of the qualification indicated that the qualification attracted only small numbers of students (Ofqual,

2011). These mainly chose the Higher Diploma at Level 2 (Department for Children, & Schools and Families, 2008; Featherstone et al., 2011), rather than the Level 3 Advanced Diploma that was a competitor to A-Levels.

The policy was never fully rolled out and ultimately came to an abrupt end in 2010. The reforms failed to address the dominant position of A-Levels (Hodgson & Spours, 2007; House of Commons et al., 2007; Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2007), a fundamental issue leaving the Diploma unable to compete with such a well-tested, well understood and recognised qualification. In some respect, T-levels show striking similarities to the 14-19 Diplomas; sectors covered, employers' engagement, and focus on qualifications' reform rather than taking a holistic approach. The question here remains open – what have we learnt from the fatal experience with the Diplomas?

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14-18 vocational qualifications (1992-2004)



Karen Tatham, Ph.D. student, University of Leeds

Vocational qualifications for 14–18-year-olds have been subject to multiple reforms across the period 1992–2014 some of which were short lived. Qualification iterations include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), Advanced Certificate of Education (AVCE), Applied A levels and Applied General qualifications. These reforms while appearing significant are often limited to qualification reform rather than holistic system reform. Qualifications do not operate in a vacuum. These recent reforms have similar policy aims and follow remarkably similar narratives over time, suggesting poor policy development and a lack of institutional memory.

Despite frequent reforms and ambitions of parity, there are longstanding issues of vocational choices leading to similar career choices and economic returns to their academic counterparts (Wolf, 2011, p8). This is in direct contrast to the relative stability of the academic qualification system of GCSEs and A Levels which have maintained their core structure and value to young people in accessing future pathways.

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Education Maintenance Allowance



Alice Weavers, Ph.D. student, Kings College London

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced in 1999 to support young people aged 16-18 with the costs of post-16 education, such as transport, equipment, and books. The policy was brought in to raise attendance, retention and attainment rates in post-16 education.

EMA was extensively evaluated by a consortium of external research partners through a large-scale and longitudinal study of the pilot scheme (Middleton et al., 2005). An evaluation of this review raises the importance for governments to explore how differently positioned groups of young people are affected by a change in policy. The evaluation highlighted how EMA particularly helped different groups of young people, such as those with disabilities and from lower socio-economic groups. EMA also acted as an incentive for young people who were at risk of dropping out of education (Legard et al., 2001). In addition, research by the IFS found that EMA had a significant impact on increasing participation rates for eligible young people: by 4.5 percentage points for eligible 16-year-olds in the first year and by 6.7 percentage points for eligible 17-year-olds in two years of further education (Dearden et al., 2009).

The findings of an NFER survey, exploring the overall barriers to young people's participation in education and training, was used to evaluate the EMA performance and resulted in inadvertent consequences for the initiative. NFER reported that although finance would only stop 4% of young people (from a sample including young people not in receipt of EMA) from doing what they wanted to do in post-16 education, a quarter of young people felt finance was a constraint on their options. The finding on EMA came from a small sample of young people and the lead author of the NFER study told the House of Commons Education Committee in 2011 that he felt this finding had been misinterpreted by the Coalition Government to justify the decision to abolish EMA (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011). EMA remains operational in the UK devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where the school leaving age is still age 16. Their continuation of EMA highlights the increasing difference in education policy priorities between the different governments, with England taking its own path with the more limited [Bursary Fund](#).

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Education Business Partnership



Liz Polding, Ph.D. student, University of Oxford

Education Business Partnerships (EBPs), introduced in 1991, provide a localised interface between schools and employers. They are designed to enhance learners' experiences and offer them an introduction to the world of work by providing work-related learning and work experience support, careers education, and information and guidance.

The original vision for EBPs was to integrate their activities into the school curriculum. An early evaluation of EBPs noted that there had been significant progress in establishing EBPs, and it was possible to determine that EBPs in 78% of Local Education Authorities had progressed to level 3 or above in the [Levels of Partnership grid](#) (Bennett, 1992). However, there were greater concerns, about targets and fundings primarily that led to the withdrawal of core funding for EBPs in 1995. However, many partnerships continued with funding from other sources. The need for EBPs to apply for funding and the associated (primarily numerical) targets was found to be time consuming and put additional pressure on already limited resources.

Other issues included inconsistent arrangements in place across the country. For example, some deprived rural areas were at a disadvantage because of a lack of local businesses with which to work. Some teachers appeared to have concerns regarding *'inequitable distributions of corporate support'* (Hayward & James, 2004) in favour of high performing students at 'the best' schools, rather than consistent availability of activities to all schools. There were also concerns from teachers regarding the potential for 'exploitation' of students as a 'market' where businesses were given access to schools as part of EBP arrangements. The EBP policy initiative was intended to *'stimulate the setting up of a network of effective local partnerships between business and education throughout the country. However, the view that 'training is essentially a task for employers'* (Hansard, 1988) remains problematic.

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Train to Gain



Samira Salam, Undergraduate student, King's College London

Train to Gain was introduced in 2006 as a flagship employer training programme by the then Labour government. The programme was managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and comprised of two main components: firstly, a skills brokerage to provide employers with independent advice on training and secondly, full public funding of training for eligible employees including NVQs and leadership and management training. Training was delivered via further education colleges, private providers and voluntary organisations.

The National Audit Office (NAO) found the programme had positive outcomes in relation to, for example, engaging 'hard-to-reach' employers that previously offered little staff training. Train to Gain also engaged an estimated 1.25 million adult learners. For many of the 554,100 adult learners who had gained a qualification through the programme between April 2006 and April 2009, this was their first qualification and many reported improved levels of confidence (NAO, 2009).

However, contradictory signalling to employers around eligibility and funding was not an effective way to build long-term relationships with employers, particularly among those employers who were hesitant in investing in employee training. Additionally, many businesses measured the impact of Train to Gain in relation to their business performance and whether employees felt they had benefited from it. In 2006–07, employees of 26 of the largest 100 training providers achieved less than 65% success rate (House of Commons, 2010). In addition, the NAO (2009) found that half of the employers that were involved in Train to Gain indicated they would have carried out the training without the programme. The cost of the programme was also seen as a major issue to its continuation. An evaluation by the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated at least 90% of training funded would have taken place without government support, and the programme was seen as a deadweight cost to the government.

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National Scholarship Programme (NSP)



Dr Andrew Gunn, Postdoctoral Researcher,
University of Leeds, and Dr Helen Carasso,
Honorary Norham Fellow, University of Oxford

The National Scholarship Programme was a student support scheme announced in 2010 designed to address the perceived problem that higher fees deter university applicants, in particular those from already under-represented groups in society. The NSP supplemented financial arrangements for students as a benefit at the point of use.

Within a year of its introduction in 2012, the inconsistent eligibility criteria and complex variety of benefits offered through the NSP led to doubts about its effectiveness in reducing the deterrent effect of higher fees for possible applicants from lower-participation groups. A large proportion of NSP benefits were given in fee waivers. Unlike cash given to students towards their living costs, fee waivers provide no financial help whatsoever to students in need of support when they are studying. The NSP's aims to assist under-represented groups was further hampered by its allocation of funding

across providers based solely on student numbers rather than the profile of student intake. Providers that recruited more students from disadvantaged backgrounds had to spread the NSP money they received from the government more thinly across a greater number of eligible students than providers of a similar size that served a more affluent student body.

The NSP was the wrong answer to the wrong problem. It was a political concession developed at speed that was 'bolted on to the side' of a wider set of reforms. There was no attempt to tailor it to an accurate assessment of a clearly stated policy concern. New initiatives need to appreciate the intricacies of how the higher education sector and student funding work and the context into which policies will be implemented.

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Polytechnics



Gareth Parry, Professor Emeritus School of Education, University of Sheffield

Polytechnics were the new set of institutions established by the British government to help meet increased demand for higher education in England and Wales in the late 1960s and beyond. They were formed from existing technical and other colleges within the further education system. Unlike other further education establishments, the polytechnics were expected to concentrate wholly or largely on higher education ('advanced') courses and deliberately intended to cater to vocational national needs, separated in purpose by a 'binary divide' between them and 'academic', elite universities (Crossland, 1965).

How far polytechnics were able to sustain and maintain this social mission remains an open question. The peak achievements of the polytechnics were two-fold: first, their contributions to growth and student diversity; and second, their continuing commitments to comprehensiveness and course development. As the fastest expanding part of the higher education system, the polytechnics helped make the breakthrough to mass higher education in England and Wales.

By extending access to new kinds of students, they broadened the social base of participation. In recruiting a higher proportion of 'non-traditional' students, they had to make more thoroughgoing adjustments to heterogeneity than the universities (Scott, 1995).

However, overtime criticism and challenges rose over polytechnics. They faced growing accusations of over-extension leading to problems of maintaining quality, especially at the height of expansion. By entering into multiple franchise relationships with further education colleges, they were charged with putting standards at risk. Their diversification of their provision to include nearly all major academic subjects, especially social science subjects, has been criticised as a capitulation to academic education and a sign that polytechnics failed to arrest so-called 'academic drift'. Indeed, from the 1990s polytechnics were redesignated as universities. At the same, universities have become much more like polytechnics.

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Access to Higher Education Courses



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Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses have offered a progression route into higher education, or change or enter into new careers, since 1978. That year the then Labour government expanded the provision of access courses for those 'excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways' (Parry, 1996, p.11). In 2019-20, 40,550 students were registered to study an AHE diploma in the UK (Access HE, 2022). More than 40 years since their introduction, AHE courses continue to offer a diversity of adults a pathway to obtain educational qualifications and progress into higher education.

There have been many positive reflections regarding the courses. Students believed it represented an investment in their future, many of whom have families and dependents, while offering a clear pathway to return to formal education (Busher and James, 2020; Reay et al., 2002). The AHE route has been praised as it provides a working example of how adult education could be used as a tool to counter structural disadvantage and offer a 'second chance' to counter poor early learning experiences, as well as support transitions into alternative occupations.

There has been a tension between widening participation and access to higher education (HE). Research has shown that more selective universities in the UK afford their graduates better employment/salary options. However, access into such institutions is not fair amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly for ethnic minority students (Boliver, 2013; Budd, 2017), a significant number of whom gain entry via the AHE route. Additionally, mature students are more likely to drop out of their course than younger students and face barriers in relation to developing a sense of belonging in HE institutions. The financial costs also raise concerns among students who choose the Access route. The costs incurred from course fees and study related costs, in addition to living costs, while being able to successfully complete the course and progress into HE, can be challenging for many Access students. These issues need to continue to be taken into consideration as access to HE is developed.

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Summary of findings

Reflecting on the above reviews the following issues were identified impacting on the outcomes of policy initiatives:

- Inconsistent availability and distribution of funding and other resources leads to ineffective solutions.
- Policies targeted to specific disadvantaged groups need to be conscious of the ways their resources are distributed in order to reach their intended recipients.
- Inconsistent information about eligibility criteria is a significant barrier to participation.
- Rushing policies to implementation due to political agendas is not conducive to a successful roll-out.
- Tight timescales for a phased implementation of policy does not permit adequate time for effective piloting.
- Frequent tinkering with qualifications has contributed to a fluctuating, complex, and opaque system and frustrates young people's understanding and engagement.
- Historically, qualification reform without holistic examination of the system through which that reform is pursued is unlikely to produce significant changes in outcomes.
- Developing effective relationships with employers is challenging, especially in rural areas. In all cases, it requires significant investment in resources for all involved and requires consistency of voice and action to maintain.
- A lack of centralised vision engendering inconsistencies between national and local approaches results in unintended disparities in achievement for learners, perpetuating rather than addressing inequalities.
- Effective and meaningful change is difficult to achieve without a strong appreciation of the local context and relationships with local actors (especially personal relationships) through which policies operate.

Reflection – what can we learn?

Through Edge's Learning from the Past series, we wanted to stimulate policy memory by revisiting past policy initiatives, in order to learn from their successes and failures. There is a clear call for evidence-based policy development, which evidence from the past can helpfully contribute to. However, this is only possible if institutional policy memory is nurtured and shared.

Policy development does not operate in a vacuum. Political, economic and societal contexts matter when developing and implementing new policies. These need to be considered when we learn from other nations and past experiences. Local contexts similarly influence local solutions and effect the implementation of national policy initiatives.

New policies have to have clear purpose(s) and aims against which their effectiveness can be judged. A clear link between purpose, design, delivery and outcome may support good policy development and delivery. Pilots of policy initiatives also play an important role in policy developments. Their rigorous evaluation can significantly contribute to improved policy development and improved implementation. A phased introduction of policies allows the ironing out of potential flaws before any full rollout takes place.

Funding and the availability of resources are critical to long term commitment to implementation. Many of the target population in the policies under review are young people who are at risk of disengagement and unemployment, and face significant barriers to achieving their full potential. Being aware of their barriers to engagement is key for developing and implementing successful policies. These groups of young people might require additional support and flexibility to engage with national and local programmes. Above all, every young person needs continuous and sustainable programmes to progress.

Time scale is another important aspect to design, pilot, implement, and review programmes. Evaluating a pilot requires time and programmes that are fully implemented need time to embed in the system. Quick solutions rarely fix issues.

The policies referenced in this report have demonstrated the complexity and instability of the 14-19 qualifications landscape over time. There seems to be a persistent discontent with past initiatives as new qualifications are constantly being developed and redeveloped. However, qualifications are only one aspect of the system. System reforms are often reduced to qualifications' reform and do not take a wider look at institutions, funding, pedagogy, curriculum and all of the other aspects that make up a successful experience for the learner.

There is significant scope for further valuable investigations into the past in the education sector and beyond. We call for evidence-based policy developments free from any political agenda that lead to long term and incremental improvement of the education system. A first step on this road is to develop institutional policy memory. In this, there is a role for politicians, researchers, and practitioners.

Policy recommendations

The question of 'How to make better policy' is not new. Many have sought to unpack this issue including publications such as 'Blunders of our government'¹, units such as King's College London's [Policy Institute](#), think tanks such as the [Institute for Government](#), and provoking thought pieces from civil servants past and present.² Evidently, many of us want to see things change for the better, but despite the introduction of new Whitehall initiatives such as the [policy profession](#) and the [policy lab](#), change has been slow. However, it is possible to do things differently. We now need to see greater incentives and calls to action if we are to meaningfully improve the nature of policy-making.

- **Establish long-term objectives** – The constraints of combative political cycles can make it difficult to establish long-term vision. While short-termism can allow us to address issues 'right now', real change requires a long-term vision of 15-20 years and more underpinned by clear metrics for success and substantial funding commitments. The [Federation for Education Development](#) is campaigning for a long-term vision and plan for education.
- **Develop clearer metrics for success** – Policies need to have clearly defined, public metrics for success. This way we can evaluate progress and take decisions on where to improve – including identifying if a policy isn't working. Unfortunately, we have seen many policies such as [Connexions](#) and [Education Maintenance Allowance](#) closed down due to public spending cuts. While cost remains an important objective (particularly during periods of fiscal squeeze), so too are objectives such as quality, satisfaction, equity, and distribution. We should clearly set and measure against these broader basket of objectives from the start.
- **Value subject-matter experts** – Progression within Whitehall often rewards generalists who move around. Indeed, the skill that is often most valued and rewarded is the 'elegant handling' of tricky issues on behalf of ministers, rather than deep subject-matter experts. We must value a broader range of skills in policy making – there will always be a need for agility to address the breaking issues of the day, but we also need to value depth of knowledge about how to deliver change on the ground. We should celebrate those who become passionate experts in their area, including learning from past policies, developing high-quality evidence and a network of contacts across their areas.
- **Co-developing policy that is implementable and deliverable** – Linked to the above, we should remove the disconnect between policy-makers and implementation. So more time should be spent understanding how policies will be delivered on the ground, and by consulting widely. This can begin by improving interdepartmental discussions and by civil servants seeing themselves as part of a community of professionals, all accountable for delivering good outcomes, rather than simply to 'do policy'. By drawing in multiple sources of expertise (including local government, delivery bodies, academia, and those on the front-line) we can constructively challenge departmental thinking and develop sound place-based policy. Ultimately, this will better meet the needs of our customers, unlock local ambition and ensure that those who are meant to benefit from the policy truly do benefit.

¹ King, A. and Crewe, I. (2014) *The Blunders of Our Governments*, Simon and Schuster

² [fixing-whitehalls-broken-policy-machine.pdf](#) (kcl.ac.uk)

³ [fixing-whitehalls-broken-policy-machine.pdf](#) (kcl.ac.uk)

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