

Policy coherence in adult basic skills¹

Introduction

Policy coherence can be defined as the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies, creating synergies towards achieving the agreed objectives. In simpler terms, policy coherence means ensuring that policy objectives and processes in one area do not contradict or jeopardize those in another.

A lack of policy coherence presents a particular challenge for adult basic skills. As the Movement for Canadian Literacy concluded: *...the lack of consistent and adequate funding, vision, strategy, and coordination has meant that literacy [and other basic skills] needs have tended to 'fall through the cracks'*². Without a coherent system of policy the issue of adult basic skills is less likely to be addressed, or even noticed at all.

Policy coherence can only be achieved if policy makers look beyond their own narrow areas of responsibility. Policymakers should actively look for ways to exploit the potential for positive impacts beyond their own policy sphere.

Systemic coherence

Within national governments, we should seek **cross-organisational policy coherence**: coordination between different types of public policies, between different levels of government, and between different stakeholders within and outside government. We can think about cross-organisational policy coherence in both vertical and horizontal terms.

Vertical coherence requires that the different levels of government – national, regional, and local – follow common policy objectives and align systems of funding, accreditation and quality assurance. This can be complicated if responsibility for adult education is distributed or devolved, leading to uncertainty about which layer of government is responsible. There may also be particular regional or local differences that need to be addressed.

We can also think of vertical coherence within a learning provider. Do leaders within learning providers effectively communicate and implement policy all the way down to the classroom? Within learning providers the involvement of curriculum managers and teachers in formulation of policy is often limited. However, they are central to implementation of policy and there is no guarantee that the various levels of the organization are working coherently to the same priorities.

Horizontal coherence implies that there is understanding and coordination across policy areas within national or regional or local government – for example, that the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Employment share concepts, processes and outcomes related to adult basic skills. Horizontal coherence can also be sought in the learning offer in a particular region – do college A, B & C provide complementary courses with pathways between their courses, and support for a wide range of adult learners to follow those pathways?

The concept of a Learner Journey is helpful in conceptualizing policy coherence. At each point of the learner journey, the adult learner interacts with the system. Each of these points is, in turn, influenced vertically through policy made at national, regional or local level within the system and by leaders and curriculum managers and teachers within the learning provider. Systemic coherence requires alignment both vertically and horizontally.

¹ This article is based on a speech given to EBSN annual conference (The Hague 2015)

² Movement for Canadian Literacy (2006) *Standing up for Literacy: Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance*
Movement for Canadian Literacy: Montreal

For this we should consider how an adult engages with adult education system and ask whether it meet his or her needs in a coherent way across the lifecourse. Are there stepping stones, from one educational stage to the next and are these established and functioning, providing a route from basic to higher levels of qualifications? Gaps in provision cause a break in coherence that presents barriers to adults wanting to improve their skills. It may also not be easy for an individual adult to access local provision at each stage. Filling the gap between institutional levels of education and ensuring local access to and progression through these levels is key to policy coherence in adult education. At a national level qualifications and entry requirements of adult education should be closely aligned. And at a local level the offer of providers should be aligned in such a way as to provide a coherent and explicit learner journey.

Supply and Demand

One role of adult education policy is to ensure that the supply of courses meets the demand of adults for such courses: the supply side and the demand side should be aligned. But we can also think about supply and demand in terms of skills. Is the supply of skills (as measured by such things as PIAAC) adequate to meet the demand for those skills in society – perhaps demand by employers, but also demand placed on adults who wish to or need to engage with government services? Does current data on skills supply, from surveys such as PIAAC, provide us with the evidence we need to ensure that adults have the skills that they need? If those with the poorest skills are least likely to engage in literate practices, and lack of skills use leads to skills decline, then we should work to prevent a vicious cycle in which low proficiency and limited opportunities to maintain and develop proficiency become mutually reinforcing. Adults should be encouraged to read and to write more often and to do so with greater confidence and enjoyment.

Policy should focus on creating attractive opportunities, but it's not enough just to give people the chance to read, we also need to increase their desire to read and to engage more closely with the texts that impact on their lives; not just texts in the form of books, and not just those printed on paper. Policy makers (i.e. all of us, because we all make policy at some level) need to pay far more attention to the demand side, the literate environment that we all create and participate in. We should learn about the ways in which policy influences the literate environment and use those to encourage adults to engage in more literate practices.

Challenges to coherence

Policy coherence, or joined-up policy making, is very difficult. Even with the best will in the world, there are institutional and cultural barriers to overcome. And it may be even harder to achieve policy coherence in a marginal policy environment such as adult basic skills. A number of factor contribute to this.

Stakeholder conflict can be a major challenge. Internal policy coherence is only achieved if all stakeholders are working towards the same goals and following the agreed paths. For example, teachers may prioritise outcomes such as improved confidence and attitudes to learning, while funders emphasise skills gains or acquisition of credentials.

Understanding **who controls the agenda** is key to aligning policy. If a policy has educational, employment, health-related and social welfare aspects and outcomes, leadership of that policy can be diffuse and ineffective.

Accountability regimes can be used to incentivise internal coherence, e.g. ensuring that teachers are held accountable for hard achievement of learners rather than soft outcomes. However, as we know, such systems can lead to tensions and certainly consume valuable resources (including goodwill).

Sustainability. Lack of coherence between local projects and national policy can lead to an unfortunate cycle in which local projects arise, do well, but then run out of funding and are forced to close down (or perhaps in an interim period they begin devoting too many resources to pursuing further funding or shift their priorities – those that helped them to meet local need in the first place -

to attract new funders). We need to understand how great projects arise, what happens after project funding ends and how to upscale small local projects into national/regional programmes.

Coherence can only be achieved when we are clear and explicit about what the current policy is; how the current policy is framed and what the possible policy levers are. Ensuring **shared understanding** of policy is more difficult than it sounds. Often policy coherence is not achieved because the various stakeholders lack a shared understanding of what the elements of policy are. Constant policy change (policy churn) works against coherence by requiring constant renegotiation and recalibration of policy. Constant change also inevitably reduces institutional memory meaning that new policy doesn't necessarily learn from what has come before.

Within the ELINET project we have been struggling with this: how to compare separate systems, particularly when many of those systems are anything but systematic. To facilitate discussion and promote shared understanding, we have defined a framework for the description of policy in literacy. This specifies ten areas of activity within a coherent literacy policy environment. Applied on a county-level, the framework supports the description of policy relevant to each of the ten areas of activity. On a trans-national level, it allows for the comparison of approaches to the challenges posed by, and across, the ten areas.

Conclusion

There are many factors that appear to be significant in designing effective, coherent policy. However, above all effective cooperation between all stakeholders is key and for that to happen stakeholders need to be clear about their own responsibilities and what they stand to gain and, of course there needs to be trust between them. Trust is built through successful joint working and the consequent increases in shared knowledge and understanding. Active networks, such as ELINET and EBSN, can support the development of effective collaboration, building familiarity, trust and consensus. From this position of strength all stakeholder groups can be involved in a cycle of design, implementation and review to support coherent and effective policy.

David Mallows, JD Carpentieri

EBSN, The Hague, June 2015