Government U-turn: A Policyquake in Action

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ABSTRACT

During the unique year of 2016-2017, the post-16 sector felt a policyquake because of doubt and pressure to change policy. Since 2014, students in England aged 16-19 who do not hold a GCSE grade 9-4 (or A*-C) in maths and/or English are forced to resit the exam until they reach the required benchmark standard of grade 4 (or C) in the qualification, referred to as the 'D grade policy'. Research to date has begun to explore how the post-16 sector can re-motivate learners to continue to study maths and English, but few shine a light on how the D grade policy is a return to a discriminatory two-tier exam system through the back door.

This research portrays the policyquake in action through an embedded case study design with the aim of exploring one local college's experiences by examining students' and teachers' experiences of a compulsory maths and/or English classroom. The data collected is through a range of methods to build a rich case study.

Vignettes are used to present an analysis of critical incidents that were observed or recorded during the data collection period of the study. It was the use of the vignettes as primary foci that allowed strong themes to emerge, including compliance, coercion, conflict, mindset, and voice. Through triangulation, the dissonance between policy and practice and its consequences on the post-16 sector are seen.

This research argues that the effect of the D grade policy has resulted in a conflict between the policy's intention and what individuals are experiencing in reality. This is damaging and reveals the effects of doubt and a lack of confidence in policymakers, and Ofsted, at an institutional level, creates a policyquake. Recommendations are made to ensure the policy is embedded with shared dialogue and support from educational professionals before it is implemented.

Keywords: *Policyquake, Post-16 sector, GCSE maths and English*

INTRODUCTION

Since 2014, there have been five Prime Ministers and a total of ten Secretaries of State for Education in the UK. Although all sit somewhere on the political spectrum of conservatism, they have all brought their own promises of reform and change to the role. However, the multiple changes in educational leadership and U-turns on educational policy create uncertainty within the field of Education, causing policyquakes. In line with Oosterzee (2014) and Wilsford (2008), this paper defines a policyquake as a shift in policy or attitude to policy, sharing similarities to a physical earthquake in that the timing and magnitude are

impossible to predict, creating ripples of uncertainty or change. To mitigate the effects or impact of a policyquake, any educational policy is often supported and reinforced by Her Majesty Inspectors (HMI) through Ofsted. However, as outlined by Scott (2006), GCSE reports written by HMIs have a lack of expertise, which is often disguised behind their status. Since their inception in 1987, the GCSE programme of study has been subject to several major reforms, with the most recent being implemented in 2015, resulting in the English and maths GCSE moving back towards a numerical grading system and a final terminal exam (Brown and Woods, 2022). However, the process of decision making around a policy impacts the implementation and, eventually, the success of government policy from the top down.

The Department for Education often use the term 'education reform' to market their suggestion of an improvement to a policy or qualification that is currently perceived as unsatisfactory. However, this is seen by those who are tasked with implementing the 'reform' as a fast-paced change imposed from above that they have not been consulted on. No matter how good the intentions, policy reform does not always look further than the end of its nose (Stott and Lillis, 2008). This is due to policymakers making decisions on the information they have in front of them, which is often not the entire picture; rather, it is an incomplete picture of reality, with no way of predicting the consequences (Stone, 2008). In 2014, Isaac explored the ramifications of fast paced qualification reforms of GCSE English in 2012 to ensure lessons were learnt and minimise problems for 2015 GCSE reforms. However, due to unachievable timelines, there is little time for feedback or pilot work before government reform is introduced and implemented, meaning problems must be resolved during the first few years of the course (Isaac, 2014).

Current post-16 policy dictates that from the academic year 2014/2015, it is mandatory for all learners aged 16-19 years who do not hold a GCSE A*- C grade or a 4 to 9 in maths and/or English to continue to progress towards the required standard in the qualification (Wolf, 2011; ESFA, 2015; ESFA, DfE, 2017). However, critically, if a student has achieved a grade D or grade 3, it is compulsory for that student to be enrolled onto a GCSE resit rather than a steppingstone or bridging qualification such as Functional Skills (DfE, 2017). This paper will refer to this policy as the 'D grade policy'.

In 2018, The Policy Consortium conducted a national survey to ask staff working within the FE sector whether they felt the Department for Education and the Education Skills Funding Agency produce conditions for success or failure. Overwhelmingly, the majority of the respondents stated that policy makers and stakeholders do not create successful outcomes for learners with the D grade policy, directly hindering both colleges' and students' ability to be successful (The Policy Consortium, 2018). One of the limitations of the study is the lack of clarity on what constitutes 'success' or 'failure'. Instead, the study allowed participants to write freely, expressing their views of what prevents them from delivering high quality teaching and learning for all. Cripps (2002) argued that success should be measured not by how the learning was delivered but by the way in

which the student receives it. This could suggest a reason why the D grade policy itself was identified as one of the policies that has a direct impact on students and institutions, therefore contributing to their failure. The Policy Consortium (2018) call for educational experts and researchers to be responsible for the FE and Skills provision and put an end to policy volatility, recognising the damage it can cause. The policy volatility mirrors the volatility of the number of ministers who oversee the Education and Skills provision, with ten ministers controlling Education since the Wolf Report was published in March 2011. This uncertainty and change from the highest level has consequences for FE colleges trying to successfully implement policy to ensure the best outcomes for learners.

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

The debate about the importance of continuing to study English and maths in vocational education in England gained fresh prominence in 2011 when Professor Alison Wolf published her 'Wolf Report' (Wolf, 2011), an extensive review and analysis of the vocational education system in England. Her report made, in total, twenty-seven recommendations for reform of the current vocational educational practices, scrutinising in detail the quality of provision and funding. Of the twenty-seven recommendations, four were identified for immediate action by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, while the remaining twenty-three recommendations were carefully considered for the best ways of implementation at a later date. One of the four recommendations that was immediately actioned and, according to Alison Wolf, "the single most important one" she made (Wolf, 2013, p. 24) was recommendation nine, which stated:

> Students who are under 19 and do not have a GCSE A*-C in English and/or maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications or which provides significant progress towards future GCSE entry and success. (Wolf, 2011, p. 119).

However, critically, if a student has achieved a grade 3 (or D), it is now compulsory for that student to be enrolled onto a GCSE resit course rather than a steppingstone or bridging qualification such as Functional Skills (DfE, 2017), this is now reserved only for students who have a grade 2 (or E) or below. As a result of the recommendation, a government reform was implemented, which resulted in a change in the condition of funding. In 2015-2016, The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) explained in their annual statement that they would fund all students who need to strive to achieve a GCSE grade 9-4 (or A*-C) (DfBIS, 2014). They clarified that the reason behind this was to challenge all educational institutions to set high standards and expectations to help all students achieve a high grade in English and maths, which is what employers want (DfBIS, 2014).

Since writing her report, Wolf has continually defended her recommendation and maintains that "it is a national scandal that we have allowed millions of young people to

give up maths and English without having acquired the two most important qualifications in the modern labour market" (Wolf, 2013, p. 24). Wolf (2013) draws our attention to how England is an anomaly compared to other countries, allowing our post-16 learners to discontinue studying our native tongue and maths, and as a result, at age fifteen, our learners are simply average compared to the rest of the world.

The purpose of the GCSE resit policy is to "underpin the importance of English and Mathematics in helping young people progress in their education and employment".

Disproportionately Disadvantaged

Gamarnikow and Green (2003) argued that in education, there are always winners and losers, and New Labour promoted belief in the myth that 'everyone's a winner'. However, it was in 1984, under a Conservative government, that Education Secretary Sir Keith Joseph announced that after twenty years of pressure, O-levels and CSE exams would be replaced by a fairer common examination system called the GCSE, which encompasses an egalitarian ideology (North, 1987). However, imposing a compulsory GCSE resit encompasses an elitist ideology, rather than egalitarian, demanding that standards increase for everyone regardless of ability and ambition, not taking the individual into account. The D grade policy does provide an opportunity to correct social injustices and encourage social mobility by re-engaging school leavers in maths and English. Tett and Maclachan (2007) conducted a two-phase study using a grounded approach, to explore the interconnections between social capital and re-engagement as an adult, in maths and English in Scotland. They found that there is a link between social impact and participation in education by identifying variable levels of bonding capital. According to Baron, Field and Schuller (2000), bonding social capital is the bond between similar like-minded individuals sharing and building on common connections. Tett and Maclachan (2007) found that when bonding social capital in social circles is high in terms of re-engagement, then it is inevitable that re-engagement will be high, whereas if the bonding social capital is low, then re-engagement is unlikely. Therefore, in the case of the D grade policy, if the bonding social capital or culture in social circles is to resist, then more will resist. This is, of course, true for students in GCSE classrooms but also for the individual teachers who stand before them. It is key for GCSE resit teachers to show belief in the policy and remain a positive role model, or students are likely to mirror their attitude and further conflict is felt.

According to Hill and Kumar (2008), these are classic, underpinning neoliberal views of a Conservative government, where power and funding were removed from democratically elected Local Education Authorities and placed in the hands of schools and colleges, encouraging competition and a display of a free-market ideology. This market ideology is motivated by the accumulation of capital (Giroux, 2008) in its original economic sense of reserves of wealth, whether inherited or earned. Social scientist Bourdieu (1986) considered that capital takes other forms, too: social, cultural, and symbolic, for instance. He argued that, in a similar fashion to the inheritance and accumulation of wealth, individuals were

born with other types of dis/advantage that they could use to further benefit them. Bourdieu (1986, p. 21) claimed that "social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". Very simply, the symbolic status, social skills and cultural values that individuals inherit (or work for in times of social mobility) help to place them in particular strata of society to access networks of those who are similarly privileged, enabling reciprocity among trusted others – 'social' capital – to draw on as necessary. In part, it is the possibility of social mobility that both drives and shapes educational practices. Since 1944, the biggest transformation FE has undergone is the central idea that FE must continue to move further and higher, which has now resulted in 'credential inflation' (McKenzie, 2014). The D grade policy could be seen as an example of the latest cause of 'credential inflation', as the minimum requirement that students need to achieve is a grade C or grade 4 in maths and English in order to get a good job. However, as highlighted by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) repeated testing can have a negative effect on lifelong learning.

The Skills for Life strategy project funded by the DfES focused on disadvantaged adults. The Skills for Life policy 2004 is a whole organisational strategy to improve maths and English in post compulsory education by embedding maths and English in vocational subjects giving students 'skills for life', with no expectations of attainment levels. Ursula Howard wrote for the NIACE in 2008 that although the Skills for Life policy put underachieving adults at the heart of government policy, it is imposed from the top-down, concentrating on level two learners who are more likely to cross levels rather than the learners with the greatest needs at Entry Level. Howard (2008) suggested that the rigid timetabled FE model of maths and English continues to fail students who have the greatest learning needs. Arguably, the D grade policy has a similar feel, focusing on those who are the closest to a grade C/4 rather than focusing on students who have the greatest learning needs. Instead, students with the greatest learning needs who have a prior attainment of a grade E or below or grade 2 or below are required to also study the GCSE or are groomed through an approved steppingstone qualification in order to take the qualification (ESFA, 2018), although they are the least likely to cross the threshold grades. The Education Endowment Foundation EEF (2018) noted that only 40% of students, eligible for free school meals FSM, achieved a grade A*-C in maths and English, compared with 66% of all other students. In 2017, the NUS President argued that the most recent DfE statistics show that those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those who are entitled to FSM, are disproportionately affected by the D grade policy and, therefore, will have a damaging impact on their social mobility (Belgutay, 2017a).

FE Identity

This is not the only problem for FE, with the sector also being undermined and disjointed due to a lack of a strategic national role in education and society since the post-1944 era,

whereas it could take advantage of its key strategic position between schools, universities, and employment (Green and Lucas, 1999). Instead, Unwin (1997) argued that FE has been a victim of political ideologies to correct youth disengagement in education and unemployment. The introduction of the D grade policy is no different, with its aims to correct the high number of sixteen-year-olds leaving schools without a Grade C or above in maths and English and, therefore, in the government's view, hindering them from acquiring good jobs (DfE, 2013). It is a policy that, like many other policies in FE, focuses on chasing the country's tail of adult underachievement, which is not always appropriate for individuals' ambitions or motivations, with choices being made about maths and English by a narrow plurality group of elites (Howard, 2008).

According to Miller (2006), social justice is contained within four principles, one of which is the fairness of opportunity, suggesting that someone's life chances should be dependent on an individual's capabilities and motivation, incorporating an equal opportunity to acquire new skills and abilities if desired. In 2008, Stott and Lillis (2008) argued for the right of individuals to make the wrong choices. They argued that for anyone who has failed at school, it is incredibly unlikely for them to achieve as an adult learner, and therefore, where is the real harm in giving students the freedom to choose their future, given our inadequate qualification system for less able learners? (Stott and Lillis, 2008). However, the issue of power and control of the education system over individuals in society has been argued for many years.

When critiquing comprehensive schooling, The Black Papers (1969-77) reveal the power of neoliberal forces in challenging earlier, more people friendly liberal standpoints. Neoliberal means "political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2); in other words, that market forces work in the interest of humankind, implying a universality that real life belies. The Black Papers sought to influence government to distance policy making from local government and strongly defended elite education (Ball, 2013). Then, in 1976, the former Prime Minister, James Callaghan, gave his famous Ruskin College speech, which, whatever his intention, rearticulated the ongoing debate that students were not being armed with the skills and abilities that employers needed, initiating the debate about standards in basic maths and English (Ball, 2013). In 1992, the dialogue of policy ideas between practitioners, local governments, and policymakers, the Further Education and Higher Education Act established Further Education and Funding Councils, resulting in FE colleges and Sixth Form colleges detaching from Local Education Authority control.

There is an argument for the attitude to be reversed, from the governmentality of a top-down approach to one that pushes from the bottom up. Pearce, Beer, and Williams (2008) have argued that policy should start from the bottom up, with the individuals, not with funders or employers, and learners should be given the choice to study what they want, even if this means studying qualifications that are uncertified. This bottom-up approach to educational policy would also result in a greater range and number of

informed decision makers, which could further improve policy outcomes at an operational level (Stone, 2008). Feinstein and Sabates (2008) argued that due to the number of FE stakeholders and the position between school and university, FE is hard to fully understand and evaluate, and therefore, policymakers are making decisions in the dark. This highlights the importance of a shared dialogue and effective communication at every level to guarantee an understanding of a policy's intention and, therefore, safeguard against an educational policy being implemented incorrectly (Cripps, 2002).

Policyquake.

The D grade policy is the result of concerns about the standard of maths and English among our school and college leavers and their chance of getting a job and raising standards in industries across England (DfE, 2013). The government and stakeholders create policy and then safeguard that policy by ensuring it is imposed the way they want at the organisational level. However, there should be continual interplay between educational specialists on the front line and policymakers to ensure that any required adjustments can be made. If this does not happen, it is certain that the policy will go off course and fail (Stone, 2008). Therefore, there is a real argument for better communication between policymakers, strategic agencies, unions, and FE colleges to ensure that the policy can be better implemented, as the alternative appears to be conflict at each level. At the implementation stage of policy, the process develops into a complex chain of action, with the slightest uncertainty within the chain, risking the failure of the policy (Cripps, 2002).

Through constructive discourse and collective voices being heard equally, the government can ensure that legislation is implemented efficiently within the organisations and be effective for those whom the policy change was intended (Cripps, 2002). However, in the case of the D grade policy, there was little discourse before the policy was imposed, giving the FE sector only nine months to prepare for the increased need for maths and English teachers, which could have been discussed and planned for. The lack of discourse has resulted in a shortage of college teachers qualified to teach GCSE maths and English, leading to a poor learning experience with larger class sizes. Consequently, the policy has had insufficient impact on maths and English skills for learners (The Policy Consortium, 2018).

Policymakers need to ensure that there is compliance from the sector through control of FE professionals to guarantee that the policy and its intention are implemented correctly. This is simpler with authentic discourse (Cripps, 2002). The government's resistance to the FE sector who are calling for the D grade policy to be scrapped (Belgutay, 2016; Wiggins, 2016; Martin, 2017; Longman and Raikes, 2017), and the unceasing stance of control over FE colleges suggests a continued top-down challenge to FE professionals to determine their own language and thinking (Cripps, 2002). The top-down approach from government and policymakers has led to a lack of voice from FE professionals.

METHODOLOGY

Original case study research was conducted for a full academic year at a large general Further Education (FE) college in the East of England, named the Setting. Stake (1995) points out that by using a case study, a researcher can explore the reality of their participants in an identified 'case', in this instance, the reality of those implementing government education policy that is entrenched in uncertainty. The 'case' is defined as the Setting itself and the different groups of individuals as subunits of analysis bound within the study (Yin, 2013). A single case design was used to enable the Setting to be representative of what is experienced during a policyquake. The participants who took part in the case study were selected through homogeneous sampling (Creswell, 2014). Through fieldnotes and an unstructured interview with the principal of the Setting during the policyquake of 2016-2017, this paper evidences the impact policy uncertainty has on individuals.

The Setting is a large general FE college with approximately 4400 students studying across three campuses, offering a variety of both vocational and professional courses. The large number of students means that there is a substantial proportion of the student body that is affected by the D grade policy, placing requirements on the college, teachers and students.

The Setting has embraced maths and English as a key priority, which is outlined clearly in its maths and English strategy. The strategy summarises the relevant areas linked to maths and English detailed in Ofsted's further education and skills inspection handbook (2017) to ensure the college remains focused on Ofsted's priorities. According to the college's strategy, as of September 2016, it will no longer offer Functional Skills level 2. Students who have achieved a Functional Skills level 1 will, therefore, enroll onto a GCSE resit course. The college are also clear that in the first six weeks of the academic year, a student's personal circumstances and initial assessment scores will be taken into account.

Upon entry to the college as a new or recurrent student, all students are required to undertake a Basic and Key Skill Builder (BKSB) initial assessment in maths and English, a popular online assessment used by colleges, to track and determine their current level in maths and English (BKSB, 2012). Results from these initial assessments, along with outcomes from classwork, are necessary to inform appropriate needs and support in and out of the classroom. Due to the importance of maths and English, it is the college's expectation that all staff will embed maths and English skills in all vocational study programmes, using a consistent college approach.

Great care was taken to gain participants' consent voluntarily, ensuring the nature of the research was transparent, so they were fully informed and had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All teachers were told that they were under no obligation to take part in my study and that every effort would be made to ensure anonymity, including the use of false names and the college being unnamed, although job roles would be identified. The nature of my research has purposefully involved the personal opinions, emotions,

stories, and data of my participants, all of which has been stored securely and dealt with in a professional and confidential manner. Anonymity was upheld throughout the study by not identifying the Setting and changing the names of my participants with English teachers having names beginning with 'E' and maths teachers having names beginning with 'M'.

Field notes were collected throughout the entire life cycle of the case study. Keeping field notes records informal data and 'other' contextual information, which may be relevant information that may not be collectible via other methods (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2012). During the original case study, considerable time was spent at the Setting in order to absorb and understand the culture and the naturally occurring talk that took place within the educational setting between varieties of individuals. Silverman (2006) points out that researchers should remember that conversations are the main method in which social interaction occurs, and therefore, the researcher should not assume that conversation is insignificant or just talk. A strength of the case study methodology permits the researcher to be involved and "observe effects in real contexts, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both cases and effects, and that in-depth understanding is required to do justice to the case" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.289). Exploiting a case study approach allowed for holistic exploration of the findings to explain, describe, and explore in context, using both a reflective and linear process.

Frank (2010) suggests in his socio-narratology that researchers of social science should be less preoccupied with finding themes in their stories but should be more concerned with how they inform life. Although a dialogical narrative analysis study was not used specifically, the findings present the story of the academic term, providing insight into their experiences but also a sense of meaning and form to voices previously unheard (Frank, 2010). The findings use coherent narrative descriptions of my participants' stories, which married well with the case study design as Stake (1995) argues that case study researchers want to voice the stories of their participants. Like many narrative practices, the findings presented in this paper aim to present the big story of the policquake, gathered from the small stories of my range of methods approach, which has allowed me to analyse my data in context (Bochner and Riggs, 2014).

A narrative lens was used to strengthen the analysis. According to Hunter (2010), narrative analysis means that data is analysed in its context and from its differing perspectives. This was a key advantage of the embedded single-case study design, as the data needed to be contextualised across the case. The findings are entitled 'The story of a policyquake', and using a narrative approach, it has a natural chronology showing research taking place in real time to ensure that the storyline of the findings of the case study is clear. Thomas (2016) goes as far as to compare the key fibres of a story to that of a case study and, therefore, suggests that using narrative within case studies is important to help to make sense of the whole.

FINDINGS: THE 'STORY OF A POLICYQUAKE'

During the academic year 2016-2017, the discussions surrounding the effects of the D grade policy on students and FE colleges continued to rage on between Ofsted, unions, and policymakers. As argued by Scott (2006), many of the claims within these discussions were unfounded due to no account of conceptual or methodological grounding. The uncertainty of the D grade policy was juxtaposed with student and teacher uncertainty around the purpose of the GCSE. The findings presented are a narrative account of the D grade policyquake in action at the Setting during the spring term and the effects of policy uncertainty.

March 2017-April 2017

Despite coming towards the end of the Spring Term and GCSE maths and English revision being undertaken, Ofsted, unions, and policymakers are still discussing the effects and impact of the D grade policy, but little did anyone know that a complete about-turn was going to be announced.

On 28th March 2017, the FE sector were given the news that many had been asking for since the D grade policy was introduced. It was reported in FE Weekly *'Exclusive: DfE to scrap forced GCSE English and maths resits'*. Clarification of this was to be confirmed in the funding guidance, which would be published in April (Offord, 2017). Also, on 28th March 2017, a letter was published from Justine Greening to Neil Carmichael, chair of the Education Select Committee, outlining that the new grade 4 will be equivalent to the grade C rather than their original plan of a grade 5.

Following the anticipated news that the Skills Funding Agency would confirm the reports of a government U-turn on the D-grade policy, I emailed Eloise, the head of English and Mae, the head of maths, to capture their instant reactions before returning to the college to talk directly to the Principal, Philip, on 30th March 2017.

> Subject line: The government U turn is great for FE.
>
> I am all for trying to stretch the students understanding of maths and develop their skills, but as usual the thing that will hold us back is the curriculum planning – how many hours we will get for delivery – if you don't have time to properly have a conversation and discussion with students on the ins and outs of different concepts they will not have the time to develop their deeper thinking skills and underpinning knowledge as this is what will hold FE students back – as many of our students struggled with the concepts in school and therefore need more time to explore misconceptions help and then extra time to address and discuss.

Mae is clearly pleased with the news, not just for her students but what this means in general for the sector. It is, however, obvious that, in her view, there are still other issues that policy change does not solve, such as time restraints and the support level these students need. Due to the students finding many mathematical concepts difficult in school

(Loynd, 2014), Mae desires more time to ensure deeper learning and not shallow learning to take place (Marton and Säljo¨, 1976). Behind the D grade policy, there is a good moral need and aspiration for all young people to continue to develop their skills in maths and English. By removing the requirement to continuously retake the GCSE in order to reach a specified level, whatever that level might be, teachers like Mae are hopeful that they can focus on correcting students' misconceptions and develop their skills for life. Eloise texted me her reaction to the news:

> *We will still have to offer GCSE due to HE but can see a lot more FS. Told the team this week and Mick ad Emily were not impressed*

Eloise is foreseeing what will happen as a consequence of the U-turn and what it will mean for the college, staff and students. If colleges no longer have to continue with forced GCSE resits Eloise predicts that the college will have to offer more Functional Skills in maths and English. This will mean that current GCSE teachers will teach less GCSE but more functional skills or equivalent qualification. Although the staff have been vocal about how hard it is for them to teach the GCSE to disaffected students and how hard it is for students to be stuck in the cycle of resits, the news that they would not have to teach the GCSE resit has not received a positive reaction.

When I visited the college on 30th March, the maths and English teams were not happy at the thought of teaching more Functional Skills. None of the staff seemed worried about redundancy, but they appeared angry about teaching Functional Skills, as this is not what they are employed to do. Michelle, a maths teacher, stated, "I am not teaching more Functional Skills, no way. That's not my job", and Mick, another maths teacher, believes, "it's not as interesting to teach. It's easy". None of the maths and English team expressed their relief that the GCSE resit cycle would be stopped despite the challenges both staff and students have faced so far this year.

There appears to be a status battle between teaching the GCSE and Functional Skills. Eloise admits that the maths and English teachers all have at least one hour of Functional Skills on their timetables, and they do not enjoy teaching this. This perceived 'negative' view of Functional Skills is reflected in the students. I spoke to a group of students studying their GCSE maths resit and asked; would you rather do Functional Skills maths or GCSE maths? One said, "What's Functional Skills*?*" and another said, "No, it's crap" It's clear that although the GCSE resit it is causing challenges, it is still more favourable to studying Functional Skills.

> Mae: *Functional Skills is not fit for purpose. Does that mean if it is taking the place of GCSE resit that it is no longer a steppingstone to the GCSE?*

Mae and the team highlight a key point, that if the functional skills qualification is to

take the place of the GCSE, it will need an overhaul in order to develop deeper learning, as Mae outlined in her email. She is suggesting that the students need to be better prepared for their vocational areas and careers as she believes this is what is holding them back. The news of the U-turn is unsettling in that the government will also have to announce to the sector what the alternative is, as clearly, Functional Skills will not be enough to make FE colleges happy. Just going back on the policy is not enough. The sector, the colleges and the students need clarity and reassurance that the policy will not be changed to something else that will not work. The department has again chosen to share the confusion of the GCSE resits with the students by tweeting a link to the TES asking for clarity on what will happen to the D grade policy.

While sitting in the staff room, the atmosphere is very tense, and the staff generally seem irritated. The staff are in limbo following the announcement of the U-turn and are not sure what will happen and what direction the college will go in terms of its teaching, and they are so busy that they do not have time to think about it because they are short staffed and rushing around. Whilst in the staffroom, I have seen student after student come in and ask about their upcoming exams and controlled assessments. She has not stopped, and Eloise, the head of English, is also rushed off her feet. Despite the department tweeting about the debate, none of the students coming to the department are asking questions about the U-turn or asking for clarification on the situation.

Although many in the sector called for and continue to call for the D grade policy to be scrapped, the news of the U-turn is unsettling as the government would also have to announce to the sector what the alternative is. Just going back on the policy is not enough. The sector, the colleges and the students need clarity and reassurance that the policy will not be changed to something else that will not work. For example, the recent TBI (2022) report 'Ending the big squeeze on skills: How to future proof education in England' calling for major reform to the education system and scrapping GCSEs could be causing similar concern now in the sector.

The following interview with Philip, the principal of the Setting, captured his reaction to the news of a U-turn on the policy and his view of the possible confusion that it was causing. It was important that Philip led the interview to ensure that he could discuss all the different ways he perceived the situation, without being steered in any way. The interview took place in his office, and he spoke clearly and honestly.

Philip	*There has been a slight change in direction over the last few months. Everyone agrees that English and maths needs to improve but it is the tool that is wrong.* *Policy was needed because employers understood the GCSE but there has been a softening with Justine Greening. Ofsted have also had their say and Ofsted don't normally comment on policy.* *Paul Joyce made a comment about the policy at regional level which I think was laying the groundwork for the U-turn. We need clarity on what it means for the condition of funding for students graded 1-3. You can say you can change it but to what???*
Interviewer:	[What do you think of the announcement?]
Philip	*I think the U-turn is good, it means we are going back to what is right for the learner, however, does that mean they are going to re-vamp FS?* *At the moment, because of the condition of funding, all are doing the GCSE as it is a question of money.* *The GCSE is a difficult sell, and we are being judged on our ability to churn out A*-Cs, you know we have to do this because of that. I hope they make the right decision for young people.* *It will change the landscape of the English and maths teams as we have GCSE teachers not FS. If the situation changes, we will have to look at how we deliver English and Maths. I'm a fan of proper embedding of English and Maths.* *The GCSE is the wrong vehicle for improving English and maths. They launch it, there are problems with it then gets painful along the way, we need to stop that, they need to listen to us as professionals.*

The interview with Philip touches upon a number of key issues with the D grade policy and the implementation of policy in the sector. It shows that he had an idea that the change was coming through regional meetings and a 'softening' following input from the 2016 Ofsted report and, in his view, that it wasn't simply media rumours. He agrees that it is a welcome change. He repeats his view of the GCSE by explaining that the GCSE is the wrong 'tool' and the wrong 'vehicle' to help improve maths and English in young people. Therefore, it is a 'hard sell' to students and 'proper' embedding of the maths and English is vital. He welcomes the return to what is best for the learner, which the D grade policy is clearly not in his view.

However, with the GCSE being removed, Philip is clearly concerned about the gap it will leave and, ultimately, what will be in its place and how that will affect the college's

funding and teaching staff. He alludes to the problems of implementing policy in the way they are 'launching' the policy and then 'firefighting' the problems along the way. He argues that professionals need to be listened to in order to avoid a 'painful' experience for everyone involved. The use of the word 'painful' is significant as it emphasises his view that this is what the D grade policy has been. Philip was optimistic about the changes but wanted clarity for the colleges, staff, and students.

That clarity arrived soon after our interview on 10th April 2017 in the Skills Funding Guidance (ESFA, 2017) and then highlighted in media reports, but it was not the news the sector was expecting. It appeared there had been yet another U-turn.

The latest published guidance, which was reported to 'scrap' the D grade policy, does nothing of the sort. In no uncertain terms, it clarifies that any student who has a grade D or grade 3 GCSE in maths and/or English must be enrolled on a GCSE course and not a stepping stone qualification (ESFA, 2017). It also unhelpfully raises some of the sectors' hopes again, as it further promises that maths and English provision for 16-19-year-olds is under review and any change as a result will be communicated accordingly (ESFA, p.51, 2017). The breaking news that the 'English and maths GCSE resits not scrapped for 2017-18' was reported in the TES (Belgutay, 2017b), along with reactions from the sector. The chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute, Stephen Evans, was reported to have said, 'retake after retake is not the answer' along with Catherine Sezen from Association of Colleges, who said that the sector will be 'disappointed' with today's news (Belgutay, 2017b). The news was also retweeted from the TES Twitter account to counteract the previous message that there was change on the way.

Indeed, there was also disappointment from the principal, Philip. During our interview, he had said he was pleased that we were returning to 'what was best for the learner'; therefore, the news that this was not the case was discouraging.

> Philip: *I still don't think the GCSE is the right tool for our learners and FE in general. But we will continue to support students and staff to ensure they reach their full potential.*

Compared to our original interview, where Philip was speaking openly and honestly, his statement above felt pre-rehearsed. It is as though he is more guarded and feels it is something protocol demands of him. It has an acceptance that it is business as usual.

Due to the uncertainty of a possible U-turn in the D grade policy, Philip was able to speculate and reflect honestly on its effects on the students, staff and sector. The indecision in the U-turn itself is evidence of doubt that the D grade policy is the best option for students. This doubt was further exacerbated by Ofsted (2016), who advised the government of the challenges and effects of the policy, and as Philip pointed out, it is unusual for Ofsted to directly comment on policy. This doubt places further distrust in policymakers and the policy itself. Philip is asking for clarity that the D grade policy is right for the sector and its

students; otherwise it gets 'painful'.

With the uncertainty that the D grade policy will be removed, Philip felt comfortable stating that his opinion is in support of the removal of the mandatory GCSE resits. He strongly believes that we should be doing the right thing for the learner and no one else, which in his view, is not what is happening with the D grade policy. This is because producing results has now become the main focus of the policy (DfE, 2017), and not to improve the students' maths and English skills, which was the policy's original aim (DfE, 2017). The exam pass mark being the important factor is not serving the best interests of students or staff in the FE sector and certainly not doing the right thing for the students for whom the D grade policy is directly demotivating (DfE, 2017). The D grade policy means that the students who previously did not fit within academia and wanted to study a vocational course now do not 'fit' in the FE sector either.

A recent government report outlining effective practice when implementing the D grade policy states that contextualising maths and English is important and influences learning in the resit classroom (DfE, 2017). These findings further echo the doubts in the sector that the GCSE is the wrong 'vehicle' for improving maths and English, as the students need these skills in a professional context, not a theoretical perspective. Philip is calling out for a policy that 'fits' with the vocational sector and the 'proper' embedding of maths and English skills, not the GCSE (Leitch, 2006; O'Leary, 2008).

DISCUSSION

This policyquake has provided a valuable insight into the ramifications of policy change and rumours, from all levels, during an academic year. Being able to capture those reactions has provided an insight into the effects of policyquakes but also another layer of understanding into the D grade policy itself and some of the wider problems faced. Therefore, if another U-turn were to take place, the sector would only be satisfied with a qualification that is suitable for the sector and learner, and this would involve the government listening carefully to FE professionals. The removal of the D grade policy can only take place when a suitable and viable alternative can be implemented immediately. Equally, the sector does not want to be in limbo while these decisions are being made and needs a well thought out and timed transition to ensure that minimal distress is caused.

The experience of the D grade policy is stressful and entrenched in difficulty exacerbated by the force imposed by government policy. This pressure creates a number of obstacles that must be overcome, including management barriers, pedagogical barriers and student barriers. It is these daily difficulties which create stress and anxiety for the college, the teachers and the students, generating conflict and despair that are conveyed in open battlegrounds in classrooms and meetings. This is made worse by individual voices not being heard at all levels of implementation.

Cripps (2002) discussed the impact of policy within the FE sector over time, highlighting how government power within policy action was softly killing the paradigm.

This research refreshes the argument that there needs to be better shared dialogue at every level of policy implementation. In line with Cripps (2002), this research has shown that without good communication at each level, any uncertainty in the policy is exacerbated, and implementation of the policy is likely to fail. This paper demonstrates that the uncertainty experienced during 2016-2017 and the lack of confidence in the policy was made worse by the government's rumoured U-turn. In 2016, Ofsted suggested that the D grade policy was not effective at raising achievement in maths and English. Then, because of no clear communication with unions and FE colleges, there was further confusion and lack of confidence in and around the D grade policy's future.

If there is top-down pressure from policymakers, there is a lack of voice felt from the bottom up. Students feel as though they are silenced by their lack of choice in resitting their GCSE repeatedly. With no personal investment in the course, students feel trapped and angry, often leading to subversive behaviour in the classroom. The teachers also feel a lack of voice and a frustration that they cannot teach their subjects in the way they feel they should be taught. Teachers express this through discussions of practical barriers in everyday teaching and routines. The result is a passive resistance from staff, which can impact their teaching experience.

The senior leaders at the college also feel unheard, with the principal of the college revealing that he is left feeling as though he does not have a voice or a seat at the policymakers' table to discuss how the D grade policy should be implemented or, indeed, how to improve maths and English in 16–19-year-olds. The D grade policy emphasises and exposes a curious multilayer conflict between students and teachers, teachers and senior leaders, and senior leaders and policymakers. At each layer, individuals are feeling despair.

Philip discloses that he feels that policymakers and the government are not listening to him and the sector, which in turn creates a conflict for Philip in implementing a policy with which he disagrees. Philip feels this disagreement with the system and the structure that is at the heart of the D grade policy. However, Philip is compliant and feels enormous accountability to influence staff and students to ensure the policy is implemented (Czerniawski, 2011). He wants to be listened to as a professional, in the same way his staff do and in the same way the students do. Philip does acknowledge the reality of the situation and recognises that the policy does not work but he feels powerless to stop it.

It is, therefore, important to note that a lack of voice is multi-layered and results in conflict and frustration at each level. This is ongoing due to current uncertainty around whether GCSEs are fit for purpose.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on The Policy Consortium (2018) and the Wolf Report (2011) this paper offers an original context of the D grade policy and the effect of government updates from policymakers and the ripples of impact this has had on individuals.

This paper argues that there is a gap between the policy's intention, implementation

and reception. The findings contribute directly to the evidence gap surrounding the D grade policy by adding further pressure on policymakers (Belgutay, 2016; Wiggins, 2016a; Martin, 2017; Longman and Raikes, 2017) to review the policy and reflect on the effects compulsory GCSE resits are having on teaching and learning in the FE sector.

Through my research, the policy is exposed as having a sole focus on the assessment of a student's academic ability and not the development of the learner's literacy and numeracy skills, which does not match the policy's original intention, as outlined by the ESFA (2018). In practice, the policy does not result in an improvement in maths and English skills to support future employment. There is a damaging mismatch between the academic GCSE and vocational courses in the FE sector, creating further conflict and disengagement from the subjects.

The paper highlights the difficulties and conflicts that imposing policies such as this in an authoritative top-down approach has on individuals who are implementing and experiencing the policy. My research has exposed the consequences of imposing a policy which has not been embedded within practice with consultation between educational professionals and policymakers. During the unique year of 2016-2017, the FE sector felt a policyquake as a result of doubt and pressure to change policy. My research revealed the effects of doubt and a lack of confidence in policymakers and Ofsted at an institutional level and the importance of a fully embedded policy with shared dialogue and support from educational professionals before the policy is implemented.

The D grade policy has been and continues to be challenging for FE colleges due to the top-down authoritative approach and implementation of the policy. To add to this concern, in January 2022, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak set out his 'personal' ambition to ensure that 'all pupils' in England continue to study maths, regardless of academic level, until the age of eighteen. Once again, this pledge has been instructed from the top down with no consultation, no guidance, no dialogue and no really thought or understanding regarding implementation and young people this impacts. This paper recommends that policies and educational reforms, such as the D grade policy, should be better embedded within practice, with the support of professionals within the sector before they are implemented or even announced to win headlines. Based on the evidence presented, this allows individual voices to be heard at varying levels, and therefore, there is a greater trust in a policy's effectiveness. The education sector and the post-16 sector, in particular, are very sensitive to any changes in policy, and this leads to a further lack of confidence in the original policy or pledge, causing confusion and frustration, leading to a policyquake of a magnitude that cannot be predicted.

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