



**THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT**

**THE RECOMMODIFICATION OF LABOUR**

**AND**

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of my Parents, Paddy and Maura, for always  
encouraging me and believing in me.

In particular to my Mother who recognised the value  
of education and who has been a  
constant inspiration to me throughout my life.

## ABSTRACT

This is an extraordinary period in Adult Education.

This statement could equally have applied in 2000 when the White Paper on Adult Education, “Learning for Life” (DES 2000), was published. However, this is an extraordinary time for very different reasons.

In 2011 the government announced plans for the establishment of SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority. Allied to this change the VEC sector, the traditional home of adult education, is also changing. Sixteen Education and Training Boards are being established from an aggregation of the existing thirty-three VECs. FÁS, the State Employment and Training Agency, has already undergone significant readjustment with community and employment services and staff transferred to the Department of Social Protection in 2012 to provide an enhanced employment and entitlements Service – Intreo. Of the remaining FÁS staff, training services will transfer to the Education and Training Boards over the next few months, leaving approximately 200 staff, who will form part of SOLAS.

This research looks at the impact of these institutional changes on the adult education sector and asks, what are the implications of these changes on future provision? It looks at this through the lens of a skills and activation discourse which suggests that the provision of education and training is dictated by the needs and requirements of the labour market. These changes represent a move towards increased neo-liberalism in adult education, both by locating the sector clearly within a skills discourse which is dictated by the needs of the market, and also by extending the use of private provision within what is now referred to as the further education and training sector.

Using a qualitative analysis, this research draws on the lifeworld of Adult Education Officers to look at the changing architecture and implications of these changes.

The union of education and training is presented as desirable and necessary to ensure a more efficient and effective service in these difficult economic times. The maxim of neo-liberalism ‘There Is No Alternative’ is used to justify the introduction of a range of ‘necessary measures’. I suggest in this research that a deeper interrogation of influencing factors needs to be considered.

From a theoretical perspective this research looks at decommodifying effects of traditional welfare state provision and suggests that there is clear evidence of a move towards recommodification of labour by reducing the level of guaranteed supports to protect labour from the vagrancies of an increasingly unprotected, non-regularised and mobile economic market. This recommodification is supported by a changing discourse in education. It is the language of skills and activation which permeate our policy statements, a far cry from the White Paper (DES 2000).

The social citizen becomes the economic entity.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Glossary	ix
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Purpose of Research</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>From the White Paper to SOLAS</i>	3
<i>SOLAS</i>	4
<b>Experiential Influences</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>Adult Education</i>	6
<i>Training</i>	7
<i>Neo-liberalism</i>	7
<b>Structure of this Thesis</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1997 to 2007</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2008 to 2013</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Social Constructionism</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Methods</b>	<b>20</b>

<b>Interviews and Sampling</b>	22
<b>Coding</b>	24
<b>Conclusion</b>	24
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS</b>	26
<b>Policy</b>	26
<b>SOLAS</b>	27
<i>Functions of SOLAS</i>	27
<b>Labour Market Activation Policy</b>	28
<b>Flexicurity</b>	32
<b>Theoretical Perspectives</b>	34
<b>The Welfare State and Decommodification</b>	34
<i>Liberal Welfare State</i>	36
<i>Corporatist Welfare State</i>	36
<i>Social Democratic Welfare State</i>	36
<b>The Move to Workfare State and Recommodification</b>	38
<i>Fordism/post Fordism</i>	38
<i>The Transition to Workfare</i>	39
<b>Recommodification and the implications for FET</b>	40
<b>Conclusion</b>	42
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS</b>	43
<b>Establishment of ETBs</b>	44
<i>Internal Challenges for VECs</i>	44
<i>PLC Sector</i>	45
<i>Strategic Issues</i>	46
<b>SOLAS</b>	46
<i>Adult Education Ethos</i>	46
<i>FÁS Legacy</i>	47
<i>Skills Discourse</i>	48
<i>Non-accredited and Informal Learning</i>	48

<i>Adult Education and Training: Is there a Difference?</i>	49
<b>Labour Market Activation Policies</b>	50
<i>Contracted Training</i>	51
<i>Interim protocols with DSP and the relationship with Intreo</i>	51
<i>Flexicurity</i>	52
<b>Conclusion</b>	53
<b>CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS</b>	54
<b>Identifying Themes</b>	54
<b>Changes in Discourse</b>	55
<i>Adult Education Discourse</i>	57
<b>Shifting the balance of power: Labour, State and Capital Implications</b>	58
<i>State and Capital</i>	59
<b>Implications for Learners</b>	60
<b>Conclusion</b>	62
<b>The end of a journey ....and the beginning of another</b>	64
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	65



## GLOSSARY

AEO	Adult Education Officer
AEOA	Adult Education Officers Association
AONTAS	Irish National Adult Learning Organisation
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CEF	Community Education Facilitator
CEP	Community Education Programme
DES	Department of Education and Skills, (Department of Education and Science up to 2011).
DETE	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
DJEI	Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation
DSP	Department of Social Protection
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education and Training
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair (Training and Employment Authority)
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
Forfás	Ireland's Policy Advisory Board for Enterprise and Science
HSE	Health Service Executive
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INOUE	Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
ISSA	International Social Security Association
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
LMAP	Labour Market Activation Programme

NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NDA	National Disability Authority
NDP	National Development Plan
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NRB	National Rehabilitation Board
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PEX	Probability of Exit from Social Welfare payments
PLC	Post Leaving Cert
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit
SOLAS	Seirbhísí Leanúnaigh agus Saleanna
SWAAP	Single Working Age Assistance Payment
Tús	Community Workplace Initiative
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One could be forgiven for wondering if the term Adult Education has any relevance in Ireland in 2013.

I was last involved in formal education as a participant on the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education 1999 – 2001. This period seemed to finally give recognition to an education sector on the margins of our educational system, and culminated in the publication of the White Paper on adult education – Learning for Life (DES 2000), which was seen as a watershed for adult education.

So many expectations .... So many noble and worthy aspirations .... So little actually happened.

### **Purpose of Research**

In this research, I want to explore how we have moved from the ideology of the White Paper on adult education, to the ideology implicit in the SOLAS action plan. This research is not an analysis of either the White Paper or of SOLAS, but it is an attempt to understand the wider theoretical concepts which are influencing the development of the Further Education and Training sector (FET).

The purpose of the research is to add to the body of scholarly material on adult education since 2000. From my perspective as a FÁS employee, I would like to think that some of the findings raised by the participants, Adult Education Officers, would be heard by policy and decision makers in SOLAS/FÁS. This is a step beyond an analysis of numbers and the cost of training within the VEC sector. It is an attempt to hear the voices of AEOs as they face into an increasing skills and activation discourse, far removed from a critical pedagogy of education.

The SOLAS action plan suggests that the evolution of further education and training have led to cultural differences between the two disciplines. However, it is the expressed view in the action plan that these differences are more perceived than real. Part of the empirical research is concerned with an exploration of some of these perceptions, but it is also a wider

exploration of the economic, social and ideological factors which are influencing this change process.

I believe that these changes have come about as a result of a wider European influence, which has a strong ideological focus emanating from a neo-liberal paradigm of influence. That is not to suggest that these changes are being forced on our small nation by the ‘powers that be’ in Brussels. On the contrary, we are embracing these changes.

It seems that the presence of the EU and the IMF in monitoring public spending and economic stimulus has served the government well in introducing a range of ‘necessary measures’. After all, as we are being continually told – ‘There Is No Alternative.’

Kirby and Murphy (2011) suggest that this focus on economic efficiency at the risk of social equality is a typical indicator of neo-liberal capitalism.

The discourse which dominates this paradigm, in relation to education and training, is a skills and activation discourse. Mayo (1997) writing almost twenty years ago refers to the discourse in adult education as a techno-rational discourse with a focus on skills acquisition and challenges to providers which links funding only to courses which offer training in skills relevant to market needs. Grummell et al (2012), describes how neo-liberal influences have affected second and third level education with an increase focus on skills and the needs of the market place and increasing privatisation in both sectors, while the authors don’t refer specifically to the further education sector the implications for the sector become apparent, the marriage of training and education is not just about institutional changes, it is about two fundamentally different philosophical approaches to learning and development and how that will affect the learner and the providers. I am concerned with the implications of this powerful discourse on those within our society with least power, certainly the least economic power. Seeing people through the lens of a skills and activation discourse is seeing people as labour market entities, the economic citizen rather than the social citizen.

I will suggest in Chapter Four; Review of Literature and Policy Implications, that changes in Ireland’s Labour Market Policies, heavily influenced by the European Employment Strategy, have reconceptualised the notion of welfare state towards a model generally referred to as workfare state (Jessop 2002 and Holden 2004). Fundamental to this concept from an education and training perspective, is the belief that skills training will improve a persons’ commodity status or human capital. It focuses on individual responsibility to enhance

employment prospects, rather than on the state's role to create employment and provide supports to protect its' most vulnerable citizens. What about people whose skills are not valued, people with low literacy levels; carers; people with disabilities; people for whom the rising tide of economic success did little to improve their quality of life. What about construction workers encouraged to leave school early, lured by the high rates of pay for unskilled labourers, now in their mid-twenties still unskilled and with a poor level of education? Surely they are all victims of market forces.

The reader could be forgiven for assuming that I am not supportive of skills training or activation measures being put in place to support unemployed people back into the workforce. On the contrary, I am supportive. Of course someone who wishes to avail of up-skilling opportunities should be given every support possible. However, I am concerned as to the level of conditionality attached to peoples' social welfare payments that brings a different dimension to activation measures, which include referral to FET options. I am also concerned as to how the traditional adult education Sector will respond to an activation and skills discourse which may introduce pedagogical challenges, not in terms of the willingness and flexibility needed to adapt, but in terms of a different ethos and value required.

The concerns I have outlined above have led me to my research question: **What are the influences of Labour Market Activation Policies (LMAPs) on the Further Education and Training sector?**

*From the White Paper to SOLAS*

The White Paper - So many expectations.....So many noble and worthy aspirations.....So little actually happened.

This may seem a bit harsh as undoubtedly the introduction of community education facilitators, the adult guidance service and the increased significance given to both adult literacy and community education, would seem to suggest that a lot did happen as a result of the White Paper recommendations. However, there was little choice from an adult literacy perspective as the low levels of adult literacy had been highlighted by the OECD in 1997. It appears that because of other policy initiatives there was an understanding that monies would be directed, in any event, from the National Development Plan towards adult literacy, in 1999 a year before the White Paper was published. (Bailey cited in Fleming 2001 page 30).

Those were more affluent days in the public services. Many publicly funded agencies benefited from the introduction of new schemes and supports and perhaps, at the very least, the White Paper did serve as a blueprint for the adult education sector as to where monies were to be best spent.

In the next chapter, I will outline in more detail the context surrounding the White Paper, the resulting stagnation in the adult education sector and the political and economic context which is leading to the establishment of SOLAS.

### *SOLAS*

We now find ourselves at another point of pivotal change in adult education. Thirty-two VECs are in the process of being disestablished and 16 Education and Training Boards (ETB) are to be established this year. Allied to that is the new agency, An Seirbhísí Leanúnaigh agus Saleanna - SOLAS, with overarching responsibility for what is now referred to as the Further Education and Training Sector (FET).

I am struck by the fact that only once in the forty one page SOLAS Action Plan, which was launched in October 2012, does the term ‘Adult Education’ appear and then only with reference to the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (DES 2012 page 14).

While part of the empirical research in this paper does explore the differences between adult education and training, it is not the specific focus of the research. But what it does is highlight the change in language within the adult education sector. Language matters – how we choose to describe concepts, structures and people matters greatly and implies value judgements, and ultimately is a social construct. There appears to be a significant change developing in the world of learning and adult education and it is that changing discourse which I wish to explore, in part, in this research.

It might appear a bit incongruous to have a person employed by FÁS to be undertaking this research. While I am, most recently, more familiar with the world of labour markets and specific skills training, I am less familiar with the world of adult and community education. However, over the past number of months I have become increasingly aware of the influence of my past working life which has determined my position in this research and contributed in no small way to my ontological and epistemological stance.

## **Experiential Influences**

The starting point for this research, in chronological terms, probably goes back to June 2000. That was the time (coincidentally mid way through my participation in the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education) that the organisation I had worked for over the previous ten years was disestablished. NRB, the National Rehabilitation Board, was dissolved in 2000. The NDA, National Disability Authority, was subsequently established to provide expert advice on disability policy and practice to Government and public bodies and to promote universal design ([www.nda.ie](http://www.nda.ie) accessed 04/04/2013).

The service delivery elements of NRB were transferred to various government agencies and I and many of my colleagues were transferred to FÁS in June 2000. It has been my experience that with the transfer of staff to FÁS as a result of the dissolution of NRB, that a range of experiences and knowledge was also dissolved over time. They brought with them a range of specialist skills, for example, occupational guidance and assessment for people with disabilities, information provision and monitoring of specialist training delivery. While most people retained a specialist role within FÁS initially, this was dispersed over time. FÁS supported a range of developments that were specifically targeted as labour market interventions for people with disabilities, for example Supported Employment.

The development of a Disability Guidance Service within the Health Boards (now HSE) from 2001, offered me an opportunity to move to a service more in keeping with my personal values. I, along with many of my ex NRB colleagues, jumped ship within a year of moving to FÁS. For family reasons, I returned to FÁS in 2003.

The mission statement of NRB was ‘to enable and empower people with disabilities to live the life of their choice’. It was a process driven organisation rather than a task or outcome focussed organisation and while I don’t have a specific reference to support this statement, I can draw on my own experience of a very rude awakening to a systems driven organisation when I moved to FÁS in 2000. How our work in NRB was carried out was more in keeping with the values and ethos of an Adult Education perspective. An organisation in the business of ‘empowerment’ and ‘enabling’, as NRB was, is one that is a value driven organisation and in the case of NRB it focussed on the needs of people with disabilities. Those needs while primarily but not solely vocationally oriented, were concerned with the overall developmental needs of people.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Throughout this research I will make reference to several concepts which are open to individual interpretation. Other concepts such as decommodification and recommodification are generally not part of everyday parlance and I will offer an understanding and interpretation of those concepts in Chapter Four – Review of Literature and Policy Implications.

With regard to the former more subjective concepts, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify for the reader my interpretation and understanding of some of the key concepts which form part of the conceptual framework of this research.

### *Adult Education*

From gardening classes to a Freirian inspired critical pedagogy and all points in between - that possibly reflects the range of provision within adult education. With such level of diversity it can be very difficult to come up with a definition of adult education. Most articles, research and scholarly works in this area will draw on the definition of adult education as outlined in the White Paper on adult education, (DES 2000, page 27) ‘Systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education and training’. The White Paper identified six priority areas in adult education that needed to be developed – Consciousness Raising, Citizenship, Cohesion, Competitiveness, Cultural Awareness and Community Development (DES 2000, page 28). It is this definition which has informed my understanding of adult education.

Regardless of the definition, although clearly important as it defines and contributes to the discourse, there are different theoretical perspectives which also inform the discourse. A functionalist theoretical perspective suggests that training and education interventions ‘contribute to the socialisation and training of people into the shared value system and existing social order’ (Grummell 2007, page 183). It places strong emphasis on the individual learners’ capacity for self-directed learning. Proponents of this view include Malcolm Knowles and his theory of Andragogy and, to a lesser extent, Jack Mezirow and his theory of Perspective Transformation.

Other more critical and reflective perspectives focus on creating an understanding with the learner on how issues of power, control and understanding of knowledge is reproduced through education. This perspective is difficult to put into action particularly when the needs



of the economy and market discourage an education that is questioning of the power differentials in society.

It may become obvious to the reader that it is the functionalist perspective which dominates. From my perspective, it is the critical and reflective perspective which is desired and ultimately denied.

### *Training*

In the context of this research, I refer to different forms of training interventions, Apprenticeships, Traineeships or Specific Skills Training, generally associated with FÁS. These training or learning interventions, with a specific focus on skills acquisition and occupational enhancement, are designed to improve labour market participation. They are generally perceived as more aligned to the needs of market forces, and equally and unambiguously influenced by market needs in terms of provision. From a theoretical perspective, these type of training interventions are influenced by a functionalist or instrumental approach to learning and are generally not concerned with an emancipatory or critical understanding of power differentials between individual, state and market. Its purpose is to reproduce the status quo.

### *Neo-liberalism*

In Ireland the term neo-liberalism is generally reserved as part of a critical discourse on the power structure and inequalities of society. It is the language of a few wayward academics and errant journalists. The preferred term that has been adopted in Ireland is the softer more acceptable word – globalisation, the public face of neo-liberalism. Few would deny the impact of globalisation on every aspect of our lives, equally so with neo-liberalism. What started as a theory of ‘political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, within an institutional framework characterised by strong private rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey page 2), has extended, by political consent and agreement, into most realms of social provision. Education, health and social welfare provision in the form of the government’s stated objective to provide private activation and placement services, have all felt the effects of neo-liberal marketisation. The marketisation of most realms of the public and social sphere does not auger well for the idea of social citizenship. Through the lens of neo-liberalism any outcome of the market is just and natural and poverty, unemployment and

social problems become the mark of personal failure, rather than systemic failure (Finnegan 2008). Grummell (2007) suggests that the neo-liberal agenda adopts adult education principles such as life-long learning for its' own economic and political advances.

### **Structure of this Thesis**

This structure of this thesis is like a road map.

It is, however, not quite as straightforward as going from A to B, but nonetheless it does document a journey. To continue this analogy, there are many different routes I could have taken to arrive at a similar destination and in part by choosing to go in a different direction this may present the reader with a different scenic view enjoyed along the way. I hope it doesn't take away from the journey but perhaps let us consider some other journeys that could have been enjoyed.

In part these represent some limitations to this research but I suggest that they are merely different views that may, or may not, have appealed to the reader. The most obvious limitation is that I am not using an established critical education theory to analyse the research.

This is not a Habermasian analysis of the colonisation of the Lifeworld that is adult education, nor a Gramscian critique of changing hegemony in adult education. Throughout my writing and analysis, elements of both are clearly apparent and either could have been used in interpreting the findings. Even looking at the concepts of the de commodification and re commodification from a wider theoretical perspective could have been beneficial. But perhaps that is the subject matter of other research.

So my journey is a different one but it is a critical examination of the changes occurring in adult education.

In Chapter Two, I outline in more detail the context in which these changes are occurring. I draw on the work of Luke Murtaghs PhD (2009) on Irish Adult Education Policy Process 1997- 2007 and the economic and political context which is leading towards the establishment of SOLAS and the ETBs, to provide an understanding of the context in which these changes are occurring.

In Chapter Three, I outline my methodology and the methods employed to guide me on this journey, the compass if you will. I outline my ontological stance which I have adopted in this research, drawing on the experiential influences of my beliefs and understandings and how that impacts on the research and my epistemological position which suggests that valid knowledge is socially constructed arising in and out of interaction with others. I then outline the reasons for my choice of methodology and introduce the reader to the methods employed and the consideration given to ethical issues.

Chapter Four introduces the reader to the policy influences, both Irish and European, on labour market activation. As my research question is looking at the impact of LMAPs on the FET sector I refer to both institutional and policy changes in the FET sector reflected in the formation of SOLAS and ETBs and changes in other areas of social policy specifically the governments labour market activation policy. I suggest that the element of conditionality and mutual obligation attached to social welfare payments is redefining the relationship between citizen and society. I introduce the concept of Flexicurity which is a conceptual framework to link activation policies including FET options with benefit transfers (income) and the needs of the market.

In the second half of this chapter I introduce the theoretical framework of de commodification and recommodification of labour. I outline the concept of the welfare state as formulated by Gosta Esping-Anderson through the de commodifying tendencies of his typology of welfare states. I suggest that changes in the conceptualisation of the welfare state and the means of capital production have resulted in a fundamental shift in the power relationship between labour, state and capital. This has introduced a move towards the recommodification of labour and the introduction of a workfare state. Finally I suggest that recommodification of labour will have implications for the FET sector through a changing discourse with greater emphasis on skills acquisition which is in turn is part of a wider neo-liberal paradigm of influence.

In Chapter Five, I give this space to my participants. The intention is to allow their voices to be heard and my influence is on organising the data into categories and themes to ensure that as much of their concerns, hopes and understanding is relayed to the reader. I hope I have done them justice.

Chapter Six is where I try to give meaning to the findings through the lens of recommodification of labour. I suggest that changes in discourse in the FET sector is an

indicator of a move towards recommodification with a greater emphasis now on a skills discourse rather than education. I also look at the implications and points of tension for adult education officers as they begin to come to terms with this change in discourse. I then look at changes in the power relationship between labour, state and capital and suggest that there is a shift occurring in the power dynamics between these three entities partly through the conditionality attached to income transfers in social welfare and more particularly through the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism and the dominance of the market in education. Finally I look at the implications for learners in the recommodification process and suggest that a more critical and developmental educational provision is required.

## **Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have outlined my research topic and I have placed this research in the context of the ideology expressed in the white paper, Learning for Life, (DES 2000). I have considered some of the experiential influences which have led me to this point of reflection. As we move towards the establishment of the new Further Education and Training Authority – SOLAS – I ask my research question in the context of a wider neo-liberal inspired discourse which emphasises the need for learners to acquire skills which will benefit the needs of the labour market. I have also introduced the level of conditionality which will be attached to social welfare payments and how this may draw people into an activation discourse, and will also impact on deliver of programmes in the FET sector. I have outlined the conceptual framework for the research and provided an overview of the structure of the thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT

The contextual landscape of the FET sector is undergoing significant adjustment. In this chapter I will outline some of the legacy issues in both the adult education and training domains, which I believe form part of the current context. These issues are not easily observed but they do form part of peoples' lived experiences and those experiences will be carried over into new work arrangements and practices – for better or worse.

### 1997 to 2007

Luke Murtagh's (2009) PhD on Irish Adult Education Policy Process since 1997, provides an informative and insightful analysis of adult education policy process from 1997 to 2007. I referred in my introduction to 2000 as being a watershed year for adult education, and in many ways it was as it represented the first statement on adult education policy. However, as Murtagh suggests, 'policy making is a process not an event' (Murtagh 2009 page 27). For many years adult education was seen as the Cinderella of Irish education provision. Prior to the Government decision to appoint a Minister of State for Adult Education (1997), and the subsequent Green Paper on adult education (1998), developments in the sector happened on a piece-meal and ad-hoc basis. There appears to have been little attempt to co-ordinate the sector or establish a clear commitment to the educational and developmental needs of adults. The emergence of women's groups, increased unemployment and new social problems emerging in the 1980s, led to local communities developing their own response to the needs of these communities. Many established services today have their roots in these community initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s.

As outlined by Murtagh (2009), effective lobbying on the part of such community groups, Aontas, NALA and other agencies, led to the government decision to appoint a Minister of State in 1997. However, while this development finally began to give recognition to the sector, Murtagh suggests that by approving a proposal by DES to prepare a White Paper on adult education, it effectively cemented longstanding institutional rivalry between DES and DETE (now DJEI) with regard to adult education. DETE was the lead department for the human resources aspect of the NDP and administered the European Social Fund programme and had responsibility for funding adult education.

As Murtagh (2009) suggests this rivalry was about control of the policy agenda and the exercise of power to influence adult education policy decisions. Having shifted the lead role in adult education policy towards DES by the appointment of the Minister of State and the subsequent publication of the Green and White papers, the DETE, clearly mindful of the activity in DES, proposed to establish a task force on life-long learning, which subsequently published its' report in 2002, a strategy designed by DETE to regain control of adult education policy.

As the departments fought their own turf wars and engaged in side-stepping, political one-up man-ship, unnecessary duplication and misuse of State resources, both financial and human, meanwhile Adult Education continued to languish on the periphery of Educational provision ... lost opportunities.

While the focus in Luke Murtagh's paper is clearly on the policy process in Adult Education, he doesn't address the differences, distinctions and similarities between adult education and training. He refers to three domains of adult education: Education, Training and Community Education. This conceptualisation of the three domains does seem to embrace more distinctly the definition of adult education as defined in the White Paper (DES 2007 page 27), 'Systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education and training'.

### **2008 to 2013**

In 2008, a series of newspaper articles and media investigations highlighted the lack of corporate governance in FÁS. Critical attention was drawn to the annual one billion Euro budget which was allocated to FÁS throughout the period of economic success and almost full employment. It was also the year that the facade of our economic success was revealed in the credit and banking crisis.

To paraphrase WB Yeats – The context for adult education policy process had changed – changed utterly.

Throughout 2008, it became apparent that our years of economic growth had ended. Closer scrutiny of public spending was crystallised in the Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (Irish Government 2009) – The McCarthy

Report. It was proposed that the number of VECs be reduced to 22 (subsequently 16). The report also recommended the integration of Public Employment Services (PES) into a single structure. FÁS Employment and Community Services were subsequently integrated into the Department of Social Protection (DSP) in January 2012, when 700 staff from FÁS transferred to DSP. Intreo, the new employment and entitlements service, is in the process of being introduced across the country, offering a one stop shop for information on entitlements, employment and training supports.

In May 2011, the Government announced the decision to establish a new Further Education and Training Authority, SOLAS. Of the 1,100 staff in FÁS, approximately 300 staff, primarily based in FÁS head office in Dublin, are scheduled to transfer to SOLAS. The remaining FÁS staff, approximately 800, are to transfer to the soon to be established Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Education and Training Boards Bill is currently in the late stages of amendment before the Dáil. The date of enactment is as yet unclear but is expected to be brought into legislation before summer recess 2013. Sixteen Education and Training Boards will be established from an aggregation of the existing 33 VECs. The current delivery of adult education provision in the VEC (in addition to the other education responsibilities at second level) will become the responsibility of the ETBs. The training functions of FÁS will transfer to the ETBs which will include centre based training, community training workshops, local training initiatives, contracted training, special training provision for people with disabilities and possibly apprenticeship training.

James, 1997 cited in Murtagh 2009, suggests that ‘Policy is a course of action which the Government has taken a deliberate decision to adopt’. In the change process outlined above, it could be interpreted that these policy changes came about as a response to the toxic nature of the FÁS brand. It was no longer an organisation seen as fit for purpose. As an employee of FÁS during this period, there was a sense that FÁS had come to represent everything that was wrong with the public service. As FÁS lost credibility, the resulting ETB and SOLAS legislation currently before the Dáil is due, I believe, in no small part to the historical FÁS issues rather than to the development of a clearly thought out policy process for the FET sector similar to that which was outlined in Learning for Life in 2000. This interpretation is anecdotal and may not be accurate, but that is less important than how the legacy of FÁS will impact on the development of SOLAS and ultimately on the FET sector. Already, indicators reflecting the FÁS legacy have tainted the establishment of SOLAS. The AEOA (Adult

Education Officers Association) in their response to the SOLAS consultation process responds to the question:

‘Should Youthreach and Community Training Centres be merged, or, should SOLAS continue to administer them?’

The response of the AEOA was:

To ask ‘should SOLAS continue to administer them?’, when SOLAS does not exist, leads the reader to believe that it was meant to read ‘should FÁS continue to administer them?’ – errors such as this just reinforces the broadly held view that SOLAS is purely the continuation of FÁS under another name. Serious efforts must be made at national level to dispel this view and foster public support for the new structure. ([www.aeoa.ie](http://www.aeoa.ie) accessed 02/05/2013).

How this change process is being portrayed in the media has done little to clarify, or ease, the concerns of people working in the sector or for learners in trying to make sense of the changing architecture of FET.

‘If SOLAS is the new FÁS, can it make a difference ?’ ([www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com) accessed 05/05/2013)

‘Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, has published a new Bill which provides for the establishment of SOLAS (Seirbhísí Oideaghais Leanúnaigh agus Saleanna) the so called “new FÁS” under the Department of Education and Skills. We are all familiar with the scandals of waste of the past. Unaccountability and incompetence led to the downfall of the current Employment and Training Body, FÁS and its former head Rody Molloy. It is sobering to consider how the organisation was spending almost €1 billion of taxpayers’ money every year during the boom, at a time of full employment. (Brian Mooney)

## **Conclusion**

One of the reasons cited by Luke Murtagh for finishing his research in 2007 is ‘The publication of the Fifth Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs heralded the start of a new era in Adult Education and the triumph of the neo-liberal agenda’ (Murtagh 2009 page 12). One assumption from this reference is in relation to the emerging dominance of the skills discourse as the defining discourse in adult education, this is in turn being the language of the market economy – the triumph of the neo-liberal agenda.

In this chapter I have outlined the context and the issues which emerged, originating in the inconsistent management by the government of adult education practice and policy from 1998



onwards. The lack of effective corporate governance in FÁS led to a perception of an organisation no longer fit for purpose. These two factors have been significant in setting the context for changes in the FET sector and the establishment of SOLAS.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

In this chapter, I will outline the methodology and philosophical assumptions underpinning this research. I will place these assumptions within a Social Constructionist paradigm which holds that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Cresswell 2003).

I will outline how this has affected the research, the ethical considerations, design and methods employed, my position within the research.

### **Introduction**

There are many approaches that I could have utilised for this research. I could have taken a purely instrumentalist approach in terms of outcomes, though-puts and cost analysis of education and training interventions. It is unlikely, however, that I would have got a place on the MEd in Adult and Community Education but I would possibly have been warmly received in a public administration or economic discipline. That is not to suggest that there is no value in a quantitative analysis of the subject matter. There clearly is a value, unfortunately it appears to be the dominant value. The discourse which permeates such analysis is the skills discourse, which in turn is part of a wider neo-liberal discourse (Grummell et al 2012, Mayo 1997). As outlined in Chapter Four, 'Review of Literature and Policy Implications', it is the skills discourse which informs much of our thinking and policies on FET. It seems almost at times if the unemployed individual could just get the "right" skills then the country could be saved from further economic woes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All qualitative research requires a particular emphasis on ethical considerations within research (Mason 2005). The inclusion of my values in the research process and my role in constructing the knowledge and data outcomes requires a high degree of reflexivity and supervision.

While the contact and initial communication regarding consent were all completed in line with the ethical guidelines, specified in the MEd in Adult and Community Education Handbook (2012), it would be all too easy to suggest that all ethical requirements were met.

Mason (2005) in her introduction to qualitative research suggests that qualitative research should be systematically and rigorously conducted, accountable for its quality and involve active reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Ethical considerations permeate every aspect of this research process and I have endeavoured to ensure that commitments on confidentiality and privacy were adhered to throughout this process. Ethical issues, while always important, were more critical at certain stages of the research, particularly in the interviews and ensuring accurate transcriptions. Presenting the findings and the analysis also required a particular honour and commitment to the voices of the participants and even although I may not have ‘discovered’ quite what I had hoped for or expected, I still feel that I was rigorous in my desire to be true to their voices.

Qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of reliability and validity. With regard to reliability, no doubt there would be different findings if someone else had conducted the interviews but I think it would be differences in nuance rather than substance.

Silverman (2001) suggests that the criterion of falsifiability is a means to assess the validity of any research. As all interviews were recorded and transcripts completed I hope this mitigates against concerns regarding validity.

## **Methodology**

The approach I have adopted to this research is a qualitative analysis and, as such, is grounded in a philosophical tradition broadly termed as interpretivist (Mason 2005), in so much as I am seeking to understand the world of further education and training, particularly from the perspective of Adult Education Officers (AEOs).

Silverman (2001) suggests that there is no neutral or value free position in social research. My research question “what are the influences of LMAPs on the FET sector”, is not being asked in order to affirm the importance of LMAPs in our economic recovery but to draw attention to the European and neo-liberal context in which LMAPs are conceived and the

affect on individuals as economic productive entities and the challenges it may induce in the traditional adult education sector. Hardly a value free research position.

In ascertaining the participants in this research, I could have chosen to involve senior managers in FÁS/SOLAS, but the language of a skills discourse is their *raison d'être* and would have produced very different results; and for me, as I reflected on my ontological and epistemological stance in this research it became apparent that that was not the kind of knowledge that fitted in with my ontological and epistemological position.

That type of quantitative research is produced on a regular basis by such bodies as the EGFSN (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs) and the SLMRU (Skills and Labour market Research Unit) in FÁS and is the dominant voice in the skills discourse. One cannot help but wonder why the need to describe EGFSN as an “Expert” group. Are all other contributions to the skills agenda “Inexpert” in some way? It is, however, typical of the type of quantitative analysis which tends to dominate policy in this area. It is the language of progression, outcomes, throughputs, inputs, whole time equivalents and certification achieved.

As referred to in Chapter One, this world of FET is at a particularly pivotal point of structural change. I wanted to find out the views of AEOs on these impending changes as it is likely that they will have a key role in overseeing and integrating the training and education functions and the philosophical underpinnings of two very different organisations, allied to which is the development of their relationship with SOLAS. This knowledge is unlikely to be gained from a quantitative analysis, and that is not to suggest that the use of qualitative research, in the context of this research, is any less valuable than the tried and tested quantitative approach. It is merely different knowledge that I seek; it is no less valuable and it is as important as a quantitative analysis of the subject matter.

## **Ontology**

On reflection, the experience from NRB outlined in the introduction has formed a key part of my ontological position in this research. Notwithstanding the difficulties that the transition posed for staff, the establishment of the NDA and the dissolution of NRB was generally supported by agencies, advocacy groups and staff. And yet, thirteen years later, has it done anything to enhance the lives of people with disabilities? The answer to that question is well

outside the remit of this research but it is that concern which I bring with me to this research. How will peoples' lives be enhanced by these changes? Who is really benefiting? What are the influences that are at work in the change process?

Blaikie (2000) and Crotty (1998) suggest that researchers should ask themselves the following question to determine their ontological position – What is the nature of the social reality to be investigated? For me the social and political reality is not just about the establishment of new structures and agencies, it is about interrogating the influences on their establishment and how those influences may affect the future delivery of services to learners in the FET sector. These influences operate at many different levels, global, economic, political and sectoral.

AEOs are one small part of that sectoral level of influence but are likely to be key personal in the delivery of future services as it would seem that they currently have the capacity to mould aspects of the Adult Education Service in accordance with their philosophical interests (Fitzsimons, 2012).

I sought to discover their understanding and perceptions of these changes with specific reference to the macro influence of labour market activation policies.

## **Epistemology**

Accounts are not simply representations of the world, they are part of the world they describe. (Hammersly and Atkinson 1983, cited in Silverman 2001 page 95).

This quote goes some way towards identifying the epistemological position taken in this research. The knowledge that I sought was not policy statements from various representative agencies. I wanted to go beyond paper and policy to people's lived experiences, their concerns and their hopes.

The research participants were not simply representing the world of adult education they are by definition part of the world that they describe. I saw my role in this research to enter into the world of an AEO and, through the interview process, to engage with AEOs to create meaning and understanding of the issues I wanted to discuss as part of my research.

## **Social Constructionism**

The ontological and epistemological perspectives outlined above place this research within a paradigm broadly described as social constructionism (Lincoln and Gubba 1994). Assumptions about what is knowledge (epistemology) and how we know it (ontology) in a social constructionist paradigm, hold that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. By definition, these understandings and meanings are negotiated socially and historically through interactions with others (Cresswell 2003). Equally as the researcher in this process, my position has to be acknowledged as a subjective presence. As outlined earlier, my own personal, professional and historical experiences are embedded not just in the research questions but in the design of the research, the construction of information from the interviews and the interpretation of the findings and analysis.

The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study. This introspection and acknowledgement of biases, values and interests (or reflexivity), typifies qualitative research today. The personal self becomes inseparable from the researcher self.

It also represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values. (Mertens, D.M. 2003, cited in Cresswell 2003 page 182).

Much of the current research in this area is based on a positivist paradigm as a means of exploring social reality (EGFSN 2012). It suggests that social reality is measurable, predictable and can be controlled. My ontology and epistemology suggests that social reality is constructed through interaction with others and is much more complex and multi-layered than perceived by the positivist school of thought. Learners, the subject of any type of educational intervention, are not predictable or easily measured, and in a positivist paradigm there is almost an element of objectifying them, seeing them as de-humanised.

## **Methods**

The decision to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews is reflected in my ontological and epistemological position. The knowledge, views, interpretations and experience of AEOs are key aspects of the FET world I wished to explore. Because this is an unfolding development in terms of new structures, I felt it was important to hear the perceptions of AEOs to the changing landscape.

Mason (2005) outlines four features of qualitative or semi-structured interviews.

- Interactional exchange of dialogue
- Relatively informal style
- Thematic/Topic centred
- Researcher works from perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual

Mason further suggests that the role of the interviewer is to bring the context into focus and that knowledge is a co-production between researcher and interviewee. ‘Qualitative interviewing tends to be seen as involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it’ (Mason 2005 page 63).

Having a keen awareness and understanding of these features helped greatly in conducting the interviews. While my own professional role entails the use of interview skills on a daily basis, the prospect of using interviews for the purpose of research did cause me to be more reflective of my own style of interviewing which, although relatively informal, required me to be somewhat more formal in the interview process.

However, with regard to issues around LMAPs there were epistemological implications for this approach (Mason 2005). Interviewees’ perceptions of LMAPs varied widely and tended to coalesce around the theme of a “Skills” agenda. In hindsight, I made assumptions around peoples’ understanding and interpretation of the term to which I will refer in my findings.

As will be outlined in Chapter Four, I have a sense that it is the recommodification of labour and the application of the principles of a Workfare State that is dictating Ireland’s policy on labour market activation. Throughout this research process, I have moved back and forth between theory and the empirical research. I didn’t start out with any clear hypothesis but wanted to use the research to explore the possible implications for the FET sector of changing organisational structures. This then led me to look at the policies influencing these changes and in particular our labour market activation policy.

It became apparent to me that I wasn’t using inductive reasoning (theory comes last) in developing theoretical propositions arising from the research but nor did I appear to be using a deductive reasoning process whereby theoretical propositions are generated in advance to be tested by the empirical research (theory comes first) (Mason 2005).

However, what Blaikie (2000 page 25) describes as ‘abductive research strategy’ appears to be a combination of both an inductive and deductive research strategy – a process of moving from the data generated, our experience as researchers and broader theoretical concepts. (Mason 2005, Blaikie 2000). It is this strategy which most closely defines my research project and also fits within the social constructionist paradigm (Gubba and Lincoln 1994).

## **Interviews and Sampling**

I have had a working relationship with two of the AEOs involved in this research, having served with them on various local work related committees. In February 2013, I met with one of them and outlined the purpose of the research. Essentially this person served as gatekeeper to the research process. It was a very helpful meeting as she made suggestions as to who would be amenable to meeting with me and also suggested that I highlight my background from NRB in the letter of introduction, as that would help “frame” my position as distinct from being perceived as coming from FÁS. An interesting observation!

I subsequently contacted all prospective participants by telephone and followed with an email and accompanying letter of introduction, which also included the consent form. In the letter I stated that I wanted to cover four main areas.

- ETBs
- SOLAS
- Integration of FÁS programmes/Staff
- Labour Market Activation Policies

The first participant requested a copy of the questions in advance. As I had hoped to keep the interviews semi-structured and focussed around the four themes outlined above, I was a little bit taken aback with the idea of prepared questions. However, this request did force me to reflect more on what I wanted from the research and to move the research from conceptual to something more focussed. Having sent the questions to my Supervisor for comment, I felt reasonably confident that I had covered the areas I needed to cover, and I decided to use the questions with all the interviewees which was sent to the participants in advance. I don’t



know (but probably should have asked) if the questions helped with the interview process or eased the interview in any way for all concerned.

I do know that three of the participants referred to 'having thought about that question' in advance of the interview, so I have a sense it was helpful. The questions appeared to be broad enough to enlist a wide scope of responses, but also allowed participants opportunities to expand on particular issues, and equally it allowed me the opportunity to pursue specific themes as they developed.

All the interviews were recorded and transcripts completed and as outlined in the letter of introduction, the recordings and transcripts were available on request which process I reiterated at the interview.

The interviews took place between February and April 2013, in the offices of the AEOs. Five AEOs were interviewed, one male and four female. While the sample was representative of five counties and four ETBs, I also needed the sample to include a mix of ETBs which are scheduled to have a FÁS training centre allocated when FÁS Services transfer over and also ETBs which are not scheduled to have a training centre. Of the AEOs interviewed, four will not have a training centre and one will work in an ETB with a training centre. This is important because the range of FET options available in the ETB which have a training centre may be different, and the issues affecting the integration of services may also be different.

There were limitations due to the travelling time involved in meeting with the participants. Ideally I would have liked to have had another participant working in an ETB with a training centre but due to time constraints this wasn't possible. Other than that limitation, I do not think that meeting with more participants would have added anything to the research findings. That is not to suggest "sameness" in the interviews. In fact, quite the opposite as each participant was drawing on various levels of experience and knowledge and each contributed uniquely to the interview process. Mason (2005), referencing the work of Bertaux and Wiame (1981), suggests that the size of the sample is dictated by the social process under scrutiny.

This means that you sample until you reach theory saturation point, that is, until you know that you have a picture of what is going on and you can generate an appropriate explanation for it (Mason 2005 page 134).

Notwithstanding the epistemological implications of LMAPs in the interview process, I think that with this particular sample group of AEOs, I had reached saturation point. However, I did endeavour to try to get a different perspective in the research process by contacting a key figure in SOLAS/FÁS. Unfortunately, due to various delays, this did not happen.

## **Coding**

Coding is like decorating a room, you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganisation and so on. (Abbott 2004 page 215, cited in Saldana 2012 page 10).

One of the biggest challenges for me was coding. I kept going back and forth to it, afraid of not getting it right. My desire was to be true to the data constructed, while at the same time being aware of my own nuanced position. I read a lot around coding, trying to figure out was I doing a thematic analysis? What categories do I use? What comes first the code or the category or the theme? Needless to say, while the books were helpful they didn't do the work for me.

It gradually dawned on me that this reluctance to engage with the coding process was that by so doing I would be marked out as a "bone fide" researcher. Something was being created in this research process that was real and while I was clearly in the process it was also apart from me. The other "eureka" moment was the realisation that by going back and forth to it, I was actually engaging with the data. I had already begun to code.

Clearly, for the size of my research sample I was coding manually. As I moved back and forth over a period of weeks, codes changed, merged and emerged.

## **Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have outlined the methodology and philosophical assumptions underpinning this research.

I have placed these assumptions within a social constructivist paradigm and outlined how this has affected the research design and methods employed. I have outlined the ethical considerations which I have addressed throughout the research. While much of the research

in this area tends to be around a quantitative analysis as referenced by the copious statistical analysis produced by EGFSN and other agencies informing government policy in this area, for the purpose of this research a qualitative analysis was chosen. I have outlined my ontological and epistemological position and place this research, in an attempt to try to understand the social reality of AEOs, within a social constructionist paradigm of influence.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Returning to a formal education environment after so long has proved to be a very challenging experience, as no doubt it should be. So many theoretical perspectives and concepts to consider, I have felt at times overwhelmed, not just by the volume of material but also the immediacy of information provision and access.

In this chapter, I will outline the key policy influences in the FET sector. I will position this policy within the framework of Flexicurity, part of the European Employment Strategy outlined in Europe 2020. I will examine current research in the area and finally I will look at the concepts of decommodification and recommodification of labour as the theoretical basis for this research.

### **Policy**

Luke Murtagh, Phd (2009) on Adult Education Policy Process 1977 – 2007, provides an excellent and informative overview of the Adult Education policy process up to 2007, capturing the tensions between the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and their respective Education/Training policy domains. It also serves as a reminder of how quickly external and apparently random factors can radically change policy direction, the ‘Butterfly Effect’ if you will.

Institutional changes do not, of themselves, produce changes in policy. The idea to rationalise the VEC structure was recommended in the McCarthy Report of 2009. The collision of events, economically and politically, presented an ideal opportunity to reconfigure the FET sector. Who could argue with a desire to change and rationalise our education and training organisations in the midst of such an unprecedented number of unemployed? This crisis has provided the government with opportunities to introduce a range of “necessary measures” across a range of policy areas under the guise of ‘There Is No Alternative’. However, what does represent a clear change in policy direction is the establishment of a further education and training authority – SOLAS.

## SOLAS

The SOLAS Action Plan (DES 2012) outlines the functions of SOLAS.

To manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of integrated Further Education and Training Boards, to monitor delivery and provide funding, based on good data and positive outcomes, and to promote Further Education and Training provision that is relevant to individual learner needs and national skills needs. This includes the need of business and future skills needs (*Page 1*).

Fiona Hartley, Director Designate SOLAS, expanded on the functions of the new organisation at a recent presentation to the National Association of Principals and Deputies Further Education Conference (10 April 2013).

### *Functions of SOLAS*

- To develop and implement a national strategy for the delivery of FET
- To consult with the DSP, Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) and employers to determine the types of programmes to be funded by the Authority and delivered by public and other bodies.
- To advance funding to ETBs and other bodies for the provision of FET
- To provide or arrange for the provision of training for employment
- To monitor and assess whether ETBs and other bodies engaged in the provision of FET programmes perform their functions in an economic, efficient and effective manner
- In consultation with the Minister for DSP, promote, encourage and facilitate the placement of persons who are in receipt of social welfare benefits in FET programmes
- To promote co-operation between training bodies and other bodies involved in the provision of FET programmes
- To facilitate and develop new FET programmes
- To conduct, or arrange for the conduct of, research with respect to any matter relating to the functions of SOLAS ([www.napd.ie](http://www.napd.ie) accessed 01/05/2013)

The key principles informing the development of SOLAS and the new integrated FET sector are:

- Learner Centred
- Outcomes Based
- Clear Strategic Directions
- Integrated and Co-ordinated

The action plan further states that:

SOLAS is an integral part of a wider programme of institutional reform that is being undertaken to give effect to the government's activation agenda. (SOLAS Action Plan page 5).

So what is the government's activation agenda?

### **Labour Market Activation Policy**

Ireland's government policy on labour market activation is set out in the policy document 'Pathways to Work' ([www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) accessed 01/03/2013).

There are five main strands to the Policy.

1. More regular engagement with people who are unemployed
2. Greater targeting of activation places and opportunities
3. Incentivise the take-up of opportunities
4. Incentivise employers to provide more jobs for people who are unemployed
5. Reforming institutions to deliver better services to people who are unemployed.

It is important to note that although the document refers to 'People who are Unemployed', the implication is that it refers to people who are unemployed **and** in receipt of a payment from the DSP. This is important when one considers that the single biggest reason for people exiting the live register is exhausted benefits (NESC 2011). These people, most likely to be

part of a couple where both are working and one partner becomes unemployed, then sign for jobseekers benefit for a period of nine months, and apply for jobseekers assistance, a means tested payment, after the nine month period. Frequently, the income of the working partner will result in the unemployed person being no longer eligible for a social welfare payment (exhausted benefits), and consequently, the unemployed person is unable to access the range of supports to assist with a return to work. Access to many courses/programmes is now based on a persons' social welfare status – a very subtle but significant policy change, which becomes more significant in light of the recommodification process.

The profiling model PEX (Probability of exit from social welfare payments) was developed with DSP and ESRI (ISSA 2010), with a view to targeting those with low PEX scores as priority groups for intervention. In addition, clients who register for the new Intreo service will be expected to sign and honour a record of mutual commitments. This is defined as a 'Social Contract to ensure that all parties understand that with rights (to income support) come responsibilities (to engage). Sanctions will apply to those who do not engage'. ([www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) accessed 18/04/2013).

The following table sets out the allocation of education and training places for 2012. The places highlighted indicate those places likely to be the responsibility of SOLAS.

<b>Table 4: Training and Education Places in 2012</b>	
FÁS/SOLAS places	<b>75,000</b>
Training Education Support Grant (TESG)	12,000
Skillnets	8,000
Labour Market Education and Training Fund	<b>6,500</b>
Further Education places	<b>180,000</b>
Third Level places	170,000
Springboard	5,900
<b>Total</b>	<b>457,400</b>

'Pathways to Work' sets out the significance of SOLAS in working with Intreo and the DSP, 'in relation to the development and delivery of education and training programmes to meet the needs of those on the live register and national skills needs' (DSP 2012 Page 21).

Pending the establishment of ETBs and SOLAS, interim protocols are to be agreed with VECs to facilitate effective collaboration.

The dominant thinking behind this document is that increased labour market activation, through more frequent engagement with Intreo, referral to education and training and other options will lead to reduced unemployment and lower levels of poverty. (ESRI Report 2012). There is no doubt that for many that will be the case but activation policies have limitations. Some of the active labour market belong to the most excluded groups from the labour market and face obstacles that employment may not be the solution for them (Vignon and Cantillon 2012). In addition, LMAPs do not address the issue of in-work poverty (people with a job but living in poor households) or the types of jobs that are available and what are the terms and conditions of these jobs.

The ESRI Report (2012) also deals in part with in work poverty. It was based on a study from 2006 – 2010 and indicated that the issue of in-work poverty, according to their methodologies, ‘do not emerge as a particularly disadvantaged group’ (ESRI 2012 page IV). I am surprised at this finding and while it is beyond my skills to critique the work of ESRI, it does serve as a further justification that coming off the live register will reduce poverty levels. Clearly it will, but perhaps not for everyone. Since the Lisbon Agreement (2000) the premise behind social inclusion policy measures has been that participation in the labour market is the most effective means of preventing poverty. Hence the emphasis on childcare capital development programmes, from 2000 to 2007, to encourage women back into the workforce.

What ‘Pathways to Work’ does do is to move from a passive form of activation to a more active model. These concepts of “passive” and “active” when applied to LMAPs generally refer to the types of intervention. Basic payments or income transfers are generally seen as passive interventions. Active interventions take the form of increased levels of engagement with PES, referrals to FET and other activation measures such as internships, community employment, Tús et cetera. Given that it is extremely unlikely that any government would own up to having a “passive” model of activation, the reality is that LMAPs consist of both passive and active measures (NESC 2011). However, it seems at times that some forms of the media suggest that it is all too easy to apply a “passive” ideation to the recipients of social welfare with all the moral undertones implied. What does critically determine an active model is the principal of ‘Mutual Obligation’ (OECD 2009) or social contract, referred to earlier. The OECD (2009) recommends a more coercive approach to activation policies and advocates an approach similar to the ‘Mutual Obligation’ of the Australian model, where peoples’ social welfare payments are used for compulsory education, training or labour



market participation. An important principle of this approach is that the very existence of activation measures contribute to a reduction in unemployment. Activation policies from this perspective emphasise the obligations of the unemployed in their “Social Contract” with the State. Success is judged by a fall in the live register figures and there is less concern with an enabling form of activation or enhanced outcomes for the participant (Murphy 2009).

LMAPs can also be understood and critiqued as “enabling” or “demanding” (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl 2008, Murphy 2008). LMAPs which focus on increased job search activity as evidenced by the number of refusal letters produced, penalties for not taking up a job, extended periods of work experience or refusal to take up a place on FET programme, fall into the workfare or demanding approach. An alternative to this, particularly for people with low skills and possibly most removed from the labour market, is to invest in human capital by having a more flexible approach to improving their long term employability, a more enabling strategy and one which will sit more comfortably in the world of adult education principles. The extent to which our activation strategies will move towards an enabling or demanding model remains to be seen and is in part the subject of this research.

There is a more fundamental critique of the activation agenda that needs to be considered. Bethzeld and Bothfeld (2011) and Digeldey (2009) suggest that the “Activation Paradigm” has resulted from the transfer of neo-classical economist ideas into the social policy arena. It is based on the premise of the economic citizen rather than the social being. From this perspective, activation strategies follow the neo-liberal idea that the task of any welfare state is to get the unemployed back into the labour market and provide an absolute minimum level of security. By emphasising labour market participation as the only legitimate mechanism of social integration and changes to the access conditions and the “incentive structure” of social policy provision, activation strategies deeply affect the form and substance of social security provision and the relationship between citizen and state.

While ‘Pathways to Work’ has received broad support, with both ICTU and IBEC supporting it, it would appear that the social right to welfare when unemployed is replaced by the social duty to work under the conditions and against the price set by the market (Van Apeldoorn 2010). Citizens’ rights become more limited and the “right” to obtain skills and education is seen only in the context of market needs.

## **Flexicurity**

From an EU perspective, LMAPs form part of an overall strategy to enhance the flexibility of labour and at the same time provide some element of income security in terms of income transfers during periods of unemployment – Flexicurity (EU 2007, EU 2010, AEOA 2011, FÁS 2009)

The concept of flexicurity is generally seen as originating in Denmark and the Netherlands in the 1990s and is generally credited with the economic success of the Danish economy, although there are conflicting research reports in this regard. The Danish model of Flexicurity was built around three pillars. **1)** Flexible employment protection, **2)** Generous social welfare payments and **3)** Active labour market policies. Flexicurity is often referred to as the Golden Triangle.

While there is no universally agreed definition of flexicurity, the European Commission defines it as ‘an integrated strategy to enhance at the same time, flexibility and security in the labour market’ (EU 2007 page 5). Sufficiently vague to allow EU States interpret it with reference to their own unique blend of employment and social policies. Europe 2020 (EU 2010) recommends that each member state adopt principles of flexicurity in its employment policy.

Turning to its components, Wilthagen and Tros (2004) identify four different types of flexibility and security.

- External numerical flexibility; the ease of hiring and firing, and the use of flexible labour contracts.
- Internal flexibility; the ability to respond to market demands through use of overtime, part-time and casual work and sub-contracting.
- Functional flexibility; the ability of firms to change and deploy the skills of employees to match changing environments.
- Payment flexibility; the ability to introduce variable pay, based on performance or results.

Clearly the flexible component is embraced and possibly dictated by the neo-liberal agenda. The security component is seen more from the perspective of the employee.

- Job Security; the certainty of retaining a specific job.
- Employment security; the security offered by remaining in paid work but not necessarily in the same job, or with the same employer.
- Income security; the certainty of receiving adequate and stable levels of income in the event that employees lose their job.
- Combination security; the ability to combine work with other responsibilities.

It becomes obvious that the permutation and policy implications of different aspects outlined above lends the flexicurity concept to be variously interpreted across EU States and by sectoral influences.

This ambiguity of flexicurity is one of the criticisms outlined in Burroni and Keunes Journal Article (2011). They suggest that although some analysts would say that the ambiguous nature of flexicurity is a strength that can accommodate diametrically opposed views on labour market problems as business groups and trade unions both support the concept, that in fact these opposing groups have very different views on how to support the concept into policy. Unsurprisingly, they suggest that the positions of these social partners, employer and unions, continue to represent the traditional views of labour and capital and that there are still fundamental differences of interest between labour and capital.

Globalisation strengthens the power position of capital, in particular Multi-National Corporations, over labour and that to an important extent, employers, managers and financial capital drive and manage the new uncertainties of the globalised post-industrial labour market. (Burroni & Keunes page 84).

The authors also looked at labour market policy and deregulation in Italy in the 1990s which led to a radical reform of labour market regulations. The effect of this deregulation did lead to a substantial reduction in employment. However, it also led to a whole series of insecurities and uncertainties as almost all employment contracts were involuntary and wages were less than those for permanent workers. The guarantees for welfare reform to protect such workers never materialised.

It appears that the “flexibility” desired by employers is incongruent with the “security” desired by Workers.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

A theory is nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of the world. To the extent that making sense of the existence is a natural human activity, it is accurate to say that we are all theorists and we all theorise. (Brookfield 2005 page 3).

At the heart of this research is the interrogation of the factors which view people as economic entities, labour commodities if you will, rather than an inclusive view of people as citizens with social rights and responsibilities.

Having outlined the policy influences and research available, I will now turn to an exploration of the theoretical framework for the economic, social and political influences which have created this context.

I will look at the changing nature of the concept of a welfare state and its’ relationship with market influences through the concepts of decommodification and recommodification. I will suggest that this movement towards recommodification is very much embedded in our current policies on labour market activation and the FET sector.

### **The Welfare State and Decommodification**

The concept of decommodification has its roots in the writings of Karl Polanyi (Papadopoulos 2005, Holden 2003, Hamblin 2009).

Polanyi, in his book ‘The Great Transformation’ (1944), argued that capitalism had to treat labour like any other commodity, bought and sold on the open market, price determined by supply and demand.

However, for Polanyi this was unsustainable because as workers compete as commodities, the price of labour reduces, leading to high levels of poverty, social unrest and ultimate destruction (Esping-Anderson 1990, Hamblin 2009). With reference to the idea of a capitalist self-regulating market, Polanyi suggested

Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society. It would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings to wilderness (Polanyi 1994 page 3, cited in Hamblin 2009 page 17).

In addition, the state is required to intervene in the market to secure conditions for profit. In the nineteenth century, responses in Ireland and the UK to prevent social unrest was through the provision of the Poor Law (Irish Poor Law Act 1838). Polanyi challenged the position adopted by Karl Marx and Adam Smith, that the economic and social systems were separate entities. For Polanyi ‘instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system’. (Polanyi 1944 page 57, cited in Hamblin 2009 page 16).

While the concept was introduced in the writings of Polanyi, the term decommodification first appeared in the writings of Claus Offe 1984 and Esping–Anderson 1985 (Papadopoulos 2005).

Esping-Anderson uses the concept of decommodification as a descriptive indicator in his typology of welfare state systems. He defines decommodification as occurring ‘when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market’ (Esping-Anderson 1990 page 21). He further suggests that just because there are basic social assistance programmes in place, does not of itself bring about significant decommodification. If benefits and assistance are low relative to medium income, means tested and associated with stigma, the level and quality of social assistance will force people to participate in the market regardless of the terms and conditions of the jobs available. However, decommodification does strengthen the hand of the worker and accordingly employers have always opposed decommodification policies. ‘There is no doubt that decommodification has been a hugely contested issue in welfare state dependency’. (Esping-Anderson 1990 page 22).

The term “Welfare State” is open to many different interpretations and conceptualisations. For many, it infers the availability of traditional social amelioration policies. Esping-Anderson in his seminal book, ‘The Three worlds of Welfare Capitalism’, sought to broaden the classification used to describe welfare states and to reconceptualise and re-theorise on what is considered important about welfare states.

For Esping-Anderson, the amount of money spent on welfare policies is less significant than how individual states choose to spend monies. Issues of decommodification, social stratification and employment, are key to a welfare states identity. He identified the following three diverse regime types organised around individual state's own logic of organisation between the state and market, stratification and social integration, each owing its origins to different historical forces.

#### *Liberal Welfare State*

Focus tends to be on means tested payments, entitlement rules tend to be strict and payments and services frequently associated with stigma. Tends to have minimal decommodification effects. [Anglo-Saxon Model includes Ireland].

#### *Corporatist Welfare State*

Tends to be conservative and preservation of status differentials is very important. [Germany, France and Italy are included]

#### *Social Democratic Welfare State*

Provides an equality of the highest standard and not an equality of minimal need. All benefit, all are dependent and all feel obliged to pay. Committed to and dependent on full employment guarantee. [Scandinavian countries]. (Esping-Anderson 1990)

While none of the regimes are pure, Esping-Anderson locates Ireland in the liberal Anglo-Saxon model based on Irelands low decommodification score. This is echoed in the NESC report, *The Developmental Welfare State 2005*, 'Ireland is exceptional within the EU for the high proportion of its social spending which is means tested' (page XVI). Also, Payne and McCashin (2005) in a study looking at factors which influence the welfare culture in Ireland, looked at the view of Ireland as more aligned to a corporatist welfare paradigm suggesting that 'Catholic Corporatist paradigm is still a fruitful one in investigations of the Irish Welfare State' (citing Millar and Adshead 2004 page 18 in Payne and McCashin 2005 page 2). Irelands post colonial heritage, late entry to industrialisation, in comparison to other EU countries, and the uncontested dominance of the catholic church in dictating the norms and values of society, do suggest elements of a corporatist welfare state.

Building on the ideas of “New Corporatism”, as evidenced by the existence of National Partnership agreements influencing social and economic policy from 1987 to 2008, is further evidence of a lean towards corporatist welfare state. However, overall the authors found that their analysis ‘suggests an institutionalised acceptance of some processes that sustain marked inequality’ (Payne and McCashin page 17), and their belief was ‘more thorough research would portray Ireland as having moved decisively into liberal mode’ (Page 17).

Two main criticisms have emerged of Esping-Andersons’ work. Firstly, he tends to view the social and the economic as distinct entities rather than looking at the “embeddedness” of both economic and social policy, as referred to earlier in Polanyi’s work.

In ‘The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism’ there is little reference to protective measures (or lack of them) while in employment which Papadopoulos (2005) suggests can have an increase in the commodification effects on labour while in employment, and also features as one of the key pillars in the flexicurity concept referred to earlier.

[This] process is actively structured and promoted by state policies; the intensification of work processes, the reductions in the protection of employment contracts, the ‘flexibilisation’ of working hours and the deregulation of health and safety conditions could not have happened without state sanction. And I would add they happen in parallel to changes aiming at those out of paid employment.’ (Papadopoulos 2005 page 7, referencing Gray 2004).

Esping-Anderson views labour market regulations as separate and distinct from decommodification through social policy. Clearly, as Papadopoulos suggests, both are embedded in each other.

The other criticism of Esping-Anderson is from a feminist perspective. Orloff, (referenced in Papadopoulos 2005, Pintelon 2012), suggests that Esping-Anderson’s conceptualisation of decommodification clearly implies citizen rights and that therefore decommodification must be linked to the role of women in work **and** household. If women are not commodified in the first instance, how can they then become decommodified? It would appear that the “male breadwinner” model excludes women from the decommodification process and any rights and benefits implied. Again this critique highlights the artificial separation between social and economic policies which was prevalent in Esping-Andersons’ typology of welfare states.

Labour market policies do not refer simply to individuals who establish contracts between themselves and their employers but rather involve the whole social universe of these individuals (their households, families, their access to resources

and care). The feminist critique not only “rediscovered” and revealed the fictitious nature of treating labour power as a commodity in the labour market, but also that its commodification is a form of valorisation that “recognises” some activities as productive while excluding others. (Papadopoulos 2005 pages 7 and 8).

Notwithstanding the criticisms outlined above, the work of Esping-Anderson’s typology of welfare states goes some way towards developing a theoretical framework in which to consider decommodifying affects of welfare policies and the interface between economic and social policies.

### **The Move to Workfare State and Recommodification**

Some further theoretical developments have built on the concept of decommodification to argue that States are now engaged in a process of recommodification (Holden 2004, Papadopoulos 20005, Pintelon 2012).

#### *Fordism/post Fordism*

The term Fordism was originally developed by Gramsci as part of his theory of Hegemony. For Gramsci, Fordism referred to a new form of work organisation introduced by Henry Ford, the American industrialist, who paid his workforce a relatively high wage (\$5 per day) which was an unusual strategy at the time and designed to minimise staff turnover and resistance from the workforce. For Gramsci this represented a form of organisational class compromise between capital and labour (Vidal 2005).

Fordism wasn’t just seen as a system of production but as part of the stabilisation of a pattern of growth built on mass production and mass consumption. Jessop (2002) suggests that what he refers to as the Keynesian welfare state developed at that time as a means of supporting this form of capital accumulation. It was predicated on a certain pattern of stable economic growth and the Keynesian welfare state was developed to reduce inequalities and ameliorate the potential for social unrest.

However, as Jessop (2002) suggests, the welfare state was introduced as a solution to the problems of a different era. Clearly the mode of capital accumulation changed as the impact of an increasingly globalised economy became apparent.



The political, economic and social sands upon which welfare arrangements were built had shifted, exposing its structural weaknesses leaving it open to criticism and restructuring. The complete dismantling of welfare was unthinkable due to both its popularity and the possible impact on the economy (Jessop 2002).

Jessop (2002) suggests that the mode of capital accumulation changed from a relatively stable protectionist mode of production to one in which increased flexibility and innovation were required from both labour and the mode of production.

An increase in technology, reduction in the traditional manufacturing sectors, an increase in capital mobility and a move towards increased monetarist policies, are key features of what Jessop refers to as post-fordism (Jessop 2002) and is equally referred to as the globalisation process.

This change in the mode of capital accumulation also required a change in the concept of welfare state and the requirement now was to shift from a protectionist to a productionist mode (Holden 2004).

#### *The Transition to Workfare*

Allied to the changes in the economic landscape in Europe over the past 30 years, were issues arising from changing demographics (an increasingly ageing population), demands on welfare systems as a result of increased unemployment and an increase in new social risks (immigration, changes in family make-up with increased numbers of single parent families). (Esping-Anderson 2002),

Deficiencies in managing these changing social and economic conditions required the move towards what Jessop terms the 'Schumpeterian Workfare Post National Regime' or workfare state. (Jessop 2002).

For Jessop, this shift from a Keynesian welfare state to a workfare state does not mean an abdication of state responsibilities but it does change the character of the interventions, with workfare policies signifying a contractual obligation on the part of the individual to undertake labour market related activities.

Holden (2004) commenting on the increased prevalence of the workfare state also suggests that

Rather than simply reducing the scope for state intervention, the process of globalisation may be one in which the form of state intervention is changing. Second the idea of globalisation may form a powerful legitimating role. It enables governments to implement unpopular policies by arguing that they have no choice. (Page 306).

Dingeldey (2005), commenting on the recommodifying tendencies of a workfare state suggest that

Workfare policies may be characterised by an increase of cohesive and enforcing elements with respect to labour market participation which may be produced by benefit cuts, the tightening of eligibility criteria, and the conditioning of transfer payments (Page 3).

It would seem that all of the characteristics referred to above, are present in our current labour market activation policy. Central to recommodification is a singular interpretation of work; that is work is conceptualised solely in terms of labour market activity.

Cementing the link between income security, albeit conditional, and participation in the labour market effectively diminishes the security for those who cannot engage in the labour market because of care responsibilities and alternatively denies people the opportunity to care because of labour market participation.

### **Recommodification and the implications for FET**

The message to workers is about a skills crisis rather than a jobs crisis. Get retrained and the jobs will come, is the message from management and various government training boards set up by politicians eager to be seen to be addressing job creation. The reality of course is that alarming levels of unemployment continue with no likelihood of abatement without a radical change in the global economic agenda. (Marshall D. 1997 sighted in Mayo 1997 page 57).

Peter Mayo (1997), writing almost 20 years ago, highlights what he describes as ‘hegemonic shift in discourse in adult education’ (Page 1). The discourse as he describes it is a techno-rational discourse which focuses on marketability rather than social justice and what I refer to as the skills discourse. The focus of activity is on providing flexible and adaptable workforce to meet the needs of an increasingly globalised economy.

As it has been outlined earlier in this chapter through the analysis of welfare state regimes, capitalism has an inbuilt tendency to reorganise itself to counter the tendency of a falling rate of profit (Harvey 2005, Kirby and Murphy 2011, Mayo 1995). It is the ideology of neo-liberalism which provides most of the support and underpinning to the process of global capitalist restructuring. It is that ideology which underpins much of the discourse in adult education and the FET sector (Grummell et al 2012, Finnegan 2008, Mayo 1997).

Mayo (1997), in describing the impossibility of a ‘value neutral’ education, suggests that

Education, either functions as an instrument to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and brings about conformity, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world’. (Mayo 1997 page 5, citing Thompson 1997).

It strikes me that the current policy and vision enunciated in the SOLAS action plan (2012), is not concerned with transformation, but with expounding the logic of the current system. While FÁS has always had a clear and unambiguous link with labour market activation (not forgetting a less significant social inclusionary aspect), the VEC have had a much more limited role in labour market activity (NESC 2011).

Through the establishment of SOLAS and its stated links with the activation process, and the labour market, it places the opportunities for educational transformative activity and in my view particularly Community Education which has traditionally, but not solely been implemented through the VEC structure, under a significant degree of uncertainty.

Harvey (2005) and Mayo (1997) suggest that it has always been a strength of capitalism to appropriate a once oppositional force and gradually dilute it to make it an integral feature of the dominant discourse. They suggest that this happens both within and outside the sphere of production. Concepts such as empowerment and active citizenship have been adopted by the dominant discourse and used as a means of off-loading social responsibilities onto the family and community (Holden 2004, Popadopoulos (2005). One could also consider the term “activation” in a normative sense implying empowerment and choice, as having been adapted and repackaged. Equally Grummell (2007) suggests that the concept of life-long learning has been integrated into a neo-liberal perspective of education and indirectly, I would suggest, also adult education, in terms of economic activity and skills.

This individuation of responsibility now clearly present in the concept of a social contract for people participating in the Intreo service, has its' roots in neo-liberalism, where any outcome of the market process is seen as just and natural. The individual is to blame and is accountable rather than systemic failures (Mayo 1997, Finnegan 2008, Kirby and Murphy 2011, Grummell et al 2012).

The emphasis in the skills and activation discourse is on investment in human capital, by improving peoples' skills, training and education and that this will produce a financial return that will benefit the individual and the wider economy.

It seems to me that through this skills discourse we are at risk of not only embedding the concepts of social injustice and inequality in new organisational structures, but that we are in fact legislating for it.

## **Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have outlined the policy and institutional changes occurring which are directly and indirectly forming the future of FET provision in Ireland.

I have outlined the concept of flexicurity as part of an overall EU Employment Strategy, which I suggest is the acceptable means of accommodating the needs of the market through recommodification of labour.

To understand and conceptualise recommodification, I drew on the typology of welfare states and the decommodifying tendencies to suggest that Ireland and the EU States are actively pursuing recommodification of its' workforce.

In this process we are fundamentally altering the relationship between citizen and state, moving from the concept of social citizen to economic citizen finally, I outlined some of the issues arising as a result of recommodification, specifically to the FET sector, which I will expand on in my analysis.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

In this chapter I will give voice to the AEOs who participated in the research. The stated purpose of this research was to look at the influence of labour market activation policies on the changing FET sector. I have suggested that these LMAPs are part of an overall process of recommodification of labour and that this process of recommodification will bring significant changes and challenges to both learners and to the adult education sector within the VEC. These changes are not just structural and institutional, which are the more obvious manifestation of the change process, but more significantly and less obviously there are also ideological aspects to the change process, as the traditional adult education is propelled towards an activation paradigm within a dominant skills discourse.

In the previous chapter I outlined the current policy influences on labour market activation. I located these policy changes within a broader European context from the Lisbon Agreement to Europe 2020. In particular, I drew on one aspect of the European Employment Strategy, flexicurity, to show how LMAPs form one part of a concept designed to ensure a flexible response to the labour market.

I was initially intrigued by the concept of flexicurity through my reading of the Adult Education Officers Association position paper (AEOA November 2011). While the AEOA were neither endorsing nor critiquing the concept, they were naming it as an influencing factor. This led me on my journey towards trying to garner a greater understanding of the policy influences in the sector and locating these policy influences within a wider theoretical framework of recommodification of labour.

I wanted to hear what AEOs, as managers and leaders of the Adult Education Service, thought about the institutional changes and the implications for their service, their practice and points of tension for them. I also wanted to explore with them their views of the wider influence of an activation agenda informing their work, values and ethos.

I have used a lot of the direct text from the interviews as I believe, in some instances, it speaks for itself and it needs to be heard in its raw and pure form. The analysis will take place in the next chapter.

### *Establishment of the ETBs*

- Internal challenges for VECs
- PLC Sector
- Strategical issues

### *SOLAS*

- Adult Education ethos and practice
- FÁS legacy
- Skills discourse
- Non-accredited and informal learning
- Differences between Adult Education and Training provision

### *LMAPs*

- Contracted training
- Interim protocol with DSP
- Flexicurity

## **Establishment of ETBs**

### *Internal Challenges for VECs*

All participants spoke about the challenges of dealing with an aspect of current delivery which the aggregation process has now highlighted; that is dealing with different interpretations on policy within VECs. It would seem that currently circular letters are issued by the DES and the interpretation of these policy documents is variously interpreted by the CEO of each VEC. While broadly similar in operating terms, it has led to local differences of interpretation which now need to be reconciled under the new ETB structures.

All participants spoke about their concern in losing the county or local response to the needs of communities. To varying degrees, all of the participants spoke of administrative challenges in the aggregation process including human resources issues, information technology and payroll reconfiguration. Most commented on the implications for staff, including the possibility of relocation and redundancy and the anxiety and implications for all staff of

possible changes in work practice. Some participants identified a particular issue and concern for staff with skills that are no longer needed.

In most cases, participants spoke about varying degrees of awareness of the change process amongst staff and felt that tutors were possibly least aware, with programme managers, CEFs and BTEI co-ordinators being more aware.

Despite some commentary from two of the participants about annoyance at the initial announcement to establish the ETBs, all participants felt positive towards the formation of the ETBs and three participants expressed, in fairly strong terms, that change needed to happen.

It will give us more opportunity to look at that is necessary and relevant. There is a great ease in just getting a budget and getting on with it, now we will have to develop a service level agreement which will force us to be more reflective, and that's a good thing.

The challenges are enormous, yet on the other hand the changes needed to come, but it's how we handle the changes. Of course there has been duplication and a bit of hit and miss provision.

I was at a meeting with the DES shortly after the announcement to establish the ETBs, and you could feel the tension in the room. People were very annoyed about the whole thing. A year later at another meeting everyone was much more animated about the whole with people saying "oh yes, we can do that". It was amazing the turn around.

It seems that despite initial difficulties, as would be expected with any change process, the VECs seem to have embraced the change process and all had initiated discussions with their aggregated partners.

### *PLC Sector*

With some participants, specific and detailed commentary came up around the issue of PLC sector. As the interviews were conducted after the publication of Brian Mooney's article (Irish Times February 2013), this was a particularly topical issue.

I never saw PLC as true Adult Education, it was something that stumbled into Adult Education, because by its very nature it was a transition from second to third level. There are a lot of challenges around their terms and conditions, and the TUI are very exercised in terms of *those* Adult Education tutors, as they call them. Basically they are like second level teachers by a different name.

There is a bit issue with PLC courses and how they are funded like a second level school. That is the model and it doesn't fit the aspirations set out by SOLAS or

for the delivery in ETBs. I think it will move towards further education, but people won't be happy.

It's a pity that this seems to be the only thing that is portrayed about Adult Education. I wouldn't mind but in terms of numbers it's relatively small.

### *Strategic Issues*

Three of the participants referred to the internal focus of energy on the change process within the VECs being "consumed" by the ETBs and expressed concerns that decisions were being made at national level regarding SOLAS which the VECs were not focussed on influencing. The sense was that they were late coming to the table and decisions were being made which they should have had an involvement with.

Ideally, the ETBs should have been established earlier and have had more of an impact on the shape that SOLAS appears to be taking.

Some participants spoke of other cohesion processes which in their experience hadn't worked very well and were fraught with difficulties, specifically referring to the establishment of the county based partnership boards.

I have seen cohesion processes that went badly wrong, the worst thing that could happen is that we have two parallel train tracks [Education and Training] rather than an integrated service.

## **SOLAS**

As referred to earlier in the introduction and literature review, SOLAS is clearly positioned within an activation paradigm (DSP 2012, DES 2010). This position both ideologically and politically is, in my opinion, clearly defining the future of FET in Ireland and, that is, that FET will become a vehicle to address the needs of the labour market. The ideas and ideals set out in the White Paper, Learning for Life, no longer seem relevant. What are the views of AEOs on this issue?

### *Adult Education Ethos*

Despite the broad general acceptance for the ETBs, it does seem that there is much more ambivalence towards the establishment of SOLAS and the anxiety of being forced into an activation focused provision where the outcomes will be more defined. I also had a sense of participants almost surrendering their role as potential catalysts of change and resigned to a fait accompli.



Adult Education for consciousness raising and civic participation and all that, we hope that some of that happens because of the way we do it, but we're not paid to do it.

I would be concerned that we become an arm of the State and only provide courses that lead to jobs, and that that was done as quickly as possible and in the most efficient manner possible, doing things quickly is not always the most efficient manner. But I think that is what we will be asked to do.

I don't think there is an understanding of the pace of the journey for the long-term unemployed, and what is required in terms of capacity building, and with the [SOLAS] focus on outcomes and progression and KPIs, the services for these people will be different. I mean how do you capture that progress which may not mean placement to a job?

I hope you can tell from everything I have said that I am very positive about all these changes. But I would not welcome a solely economic agenda, not everyone is starting from the same starting point.

Education for citizenship is now about teaching people to be a good citizen.

Obviously these are times of economic restraint, and there is a focus on value for money, as there should be, but it's to the detriment of everything else, with a lack of recognition that sometimes value for money means furring things for a bit longer.

The thing is, we are used to change in adult education. If a tutor is delivering a module and it's not meeting the needs of the Learners, they have to change direction. Changing and working in a less predictable way is not unusual for us.....we are at a different interface.

The really frustrating thing is that as adult educators we could be shouting from the parapets, but is there anyone listening?

### *FÁS Legacy*

With one exception, all participants, to varying degrees, questioned the need for SOLAS as an overseeing agency. The following is an indication of the views of four of the participants.

Some of my colleagues are anxious that we will no longer be dealing with the Department (DES). Essentially it's an additional layer.

There is a feeling amongst us that SOLAS is being established to accommodate the 200 plus staff in FÁS Head Office and we are working from that point rather than there being a need for it.

It [SOLAS] will be driven by systems and ticking boxes, given the history of FÁS, there will be an overemphasis on accountability that everything that moves has to be accounted for, rather than a balanced view of it.

It seems to me that SOLAS is going to be a rewashed FÁS.

Several participants referred to their experience of FÁS paperwork demands, ‘I mean we do paperwork, but it’s nothing compared to FÁS.’ Another commenting; ‘we used to tender for FÁS courses but we gave up.....it wasn’t worth the administrative nightmare of paperwork.

However, one participant referred positively to the likely increase in accountability.

You send up your annual reports to the Department and they’re not commented on, they are not questioned. It’s very frustrating. BTEI is a very accountable programme and that’s a good thing, but it’s not looked for in the rest of our programmes, so you can get staid, so SOLAS might be able to generate a bit of accountability for our work, and if we’re doing our job right that shouldn’t be a problem.’

### *Skills Discourse*

Three of the participants referred in a positive manner, to varying degrees, that SOLAS will set priorities and identify skill areas.

[SOLAS] in conjunction with the likes of enterprise boards, Forfás, will link us in with whatever is needed and coming down the tracks in terms of skill requirements.

FÁS have a lot of research on skill areas and that will be helpful to determine what courses we should deliver.

While most participants alluded to their concerns about a skills/activation agenda, there seems to be conflict between that concern on the one hand and on the other hand a welcoming of the benefit of research which would assist them to provide skills training.

### *Non-accredited and Informal Learning*

Four of the five participants expressed concern that interventions in this area were somewhat vulnerable in the change process. This generally came as a response to the question “Who do you see as being advantaged/disadvantaged”?

The smaller programmes, the more precious programmes, the non-accredited ones are seen as less valuable. The drive is all the time towards accreditation and that’s a good thing, but you have to have a starting point as well.

I have a concern that non-formal community education will disappear. CEFs have their own budget to provide courses for people funded by other agencies, non-formal courses, and there is huge pressure to ensure that these people progress on to something else such as BETI. I think it may disappear if they are not going on to the formal labour market.

When I tried to delve a bit deeper citing the SOLAS action plans commitment towards community education, the response was ‘SOLAS may not fight very hard to keep it’ and ‘I think that’s rhetoric more than anything.’

Another participant commenting on the additional roles CEFs appear to be taking on, other than their core work....

It’s very hard to know, it’s creating a lot of uncertainty. I think a lot of social inclusion work is vulnerable. Having said that the guidelines for community education have just been issued and it states in black and white that non-formal and informal learning is a key part of community education.

The same participant, who comes from a community education background, also noted that since returning from a period of extended leave –

Already I’ve noticed the changes. There used to be a section in the community education returns to the Department where you could write about your groups, but that’s gone now. The [DES] don’t want to know about it. It’s all about numbers now.’

#### *Adult Education and Training: Is there a Difference?*

One of the areas I wanted to look at was the perceptions of AEOs of training provision, both as a means of looking at how they view the distinctions and to explore if adult education provision offered a more decommodifying approach to learning. Four of the participants expressed strong views as to the differences between adult education provision and what they perceived to be the training or FÁS model.

The curriculum in training is more focussed on the skill side, whereas we have the guidance, literacy, interpersonal and communication supports. I may be wrong about this but it [training] wouldn’t be in bite sized, manageable pieces as we currently provide. For example, if you couldn’t cope in six months you would get longer, maybe a year, there is no requirement on the learner to do it, you can drop in and drop out whenever it suits you.

I get the impression that training is all about delivering a curriculum.....whereas for us, or for a good teacher, you have to be much more responsive to the needs of the learners.

FÁS is perceived as to be driven by numbers and maybe the quality mightn’t always be there, or attaining the certification, or the aftercare.

We are technically the same, but culturally poles apart.

People perceive training as an activation thing, whereas I feel adult education is much broader in looking at the person as a whole and trying to work with all the issues, guidance, literacy and all that. We have much more flexibility around time,

whereas what I am hearing is that in FÁS you have 16 weeks or whatever and you just have to get on with it.

What began to emerge in all the interviews was that in adult education there is a strong focus on continuous professional development of staff. Three of the participants referred to this as being something that marked a broader developmentally focussed provision as distinct from a narrower skill specific provision.

This in turn leads to a difference in “how we do it” and it is the “how” which seems to define adult education as distinct and separate from training in the context of this research.

### **Labour Market Activation Policies**

Even though this research is about LMAPs, I deliberately left these questions towards the end of the interviews.

When I made an initial telephone contact with one of the participants, her response was that she ‘wouldn’t be a good person to talk to as their VEC hadn’t applied for it’. This was with reference to a specific intervention administered by DES a year earlier, the Labour Market Activation Fund (LMAF), which targeted ‘market led *activation* measures aimed at improving the employability of unemployed persons by “progression pathways” and for *up-skilling* and *re-skilling* measures which boost human capital by enhancing education and skills levels in line with the National Skills Strategy and the needs of the smart economy (PA Consulting Group 2011 p ii, italics in original text).

It seemed to me that starting off with specific questions around LMAPs had the potential to be off-putting and may not encourage dialogue as they were so easily misinterpreted and misunderstood. Another factor emerged during some of the interviews, and that was an annoyance that the VECs didn’t get any of the contracts under the fund.

Some of them got it second time round, but I would say that was to placate people, the first time they [VEC] were up in arms that all these private providers got it and they didn’t. So there is a real sense of competition out there.

### *Contracted Training*

This sense of competition was most keenly expressed in discussions around contracted training provision. All participants expressed the view that contracted training should only be considered in instances where specific skills training cannot be provided for by the ETB.

This needs a complete rethink, a whole industry has grown up around this and some people are making a very nice living out of it and it seems that that became the driving force and not necessarily the training need itself.

Two participants expressed a concern that they (as ETBs) could end up competing against themselves to provide training.

They [private Training providers] can employ people on low pay and keep their costs down. We can never compete with them because of the cost of Tutor pay.

It's crazy really, we didn't bother to put in an application this time because our costs will be higher

The "Momentum" programme is the most recent labour market activation/training measure and ten projects out of sixty-two are VEC projects, representing seven VECs. The rest are made up of private trainers, community and voluntary bodies, for example county partnership boards.

The SOLAS action plan does state that the management of local contracted training provision will be the responsibility of the local ETB. It does highlight a tension between the individual needs of learners and the management and control of contracted training.

### *Interim protocols with DSP and the relationship with Intreo*

Key to adult education provision is the voluntary participation of the learner on courses. While VTOS started out as a labour market initiative in 1989, it seems to have lost any sense of forced participation and, as two participants stated during interviews, that they always have to turn people away in September as the course is so popular. However, concerns were expressed that instead of having a range of learners with different social welfare payments, lone parents, people with disabilities, that the service may now have a higher percentage of long-term unemployed referrals through the Intreo service. That in itself does not present a problem but what clearly is a problem, as described by the participants, is the idea of conscripts rather than volunteers. This represents a significant challenge to the adult education service. The SOLAS action plan refers to interim protocols between DSP and the

VEC as a means to establish a standard framework for the referral of unemployed people. Referring to the interim protocol one participant commented.....

An awful lot of fears came out of that process, will DSP/LES staff know to refer on, what level of skill do they need to know what we are about? You're getting people who are being made to do this....their motivation for coming on to courses, and they're asking why are they here. Class tutors are wondering how to handle all of this in a classroom environment. But on a positive side we're saying the community structures that would normally and naturally have referred to the VEC, the CEPs, they're gone, so yes it'll be a struggle and a different way of working but in a positive way, we'll have more people coming into our programmes.

What this suggests is, again the positive embracing of the changes from a managerial perspective, but a possible conflict for the pedagogical concerns of the tutors.

Various degrees of tension were apparent with the formation of the interim protocols, and what appears to have been an influencing factor, was the relationship with the local DSP office.

While in most cases this was a positive experience, one participant spoke about being handed an interim protocol from another VEC and told that this is what would be applied in her VEC. In this instance, the participant held her position and said it would have to be reworked to include aspects of their local VEC provision and capacity to respond.

One participant referred to concerns about becoming an arm of the state 'and only providing courses that lead to jobs, the reality is that some people can't earn a living'.

### *Flexicurity*

And what of flexicurity, the concept that the AEOA laid down as a defining principle in their paper in 2011? 'A makey up word that avoids telling people you will never have a secure job', and 'A way of explaining why there is congenital unemployment'.

Apart from these comments two other participants referred to sanctions being applied to people in their responses to the question of flexicurity. 'I don't see them [DSP] applying sanctions if people don't turn up for courses'.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to give space for the voices of the AEOs who participated in this research. Depending on their experience and interests, some were more exercised than others with regard to specific questions. I am extremely grateful to them for allowing me into their world and I hope I have done justice to their contribution.

## CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will present an analysis of the findings outlined in the previous chapter, in an attempt to understand and position the voices of the participants and the world of adult education they inhabit, into a wider theoretical framework of understanding.

I will suggest that critical adult education theoretical perspectives facilitate a decommodifying effect on practice but that the current discourse in FET represent a much greater tendency towards recommodification.

### **Identifying Themes**

It has been challenging to identify concrete themes for this analysis. Papadopolous (2005) analysed the effects of recommodification within European states and looked at three dimensions to determine the move from decommodification to recommodification.

#### *Discursive Elements*

How the power relationship is viewed between labour, state and capital through the use of language, concepts and policy.

#### *Structural Elements*

How our policies and institutions coalesce to establish a consensus that views social protection as protection from the market, or not.

#### *Relational Elements*

The bargaining capacity of labour vis-a-vis the state and pro-market elites.

In his analysis, Papadopolous looked at changes in these three elements over a ten year period (1993 to 2003) to determine the extent of recommodification of European labour. Papadopolous also looked at recommodification and decommodification within employment, analysing the extent of employment protection measures in work as well as outside employment.



Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that thematic analysis is poorly demarcated, rarely acknowledged and yet widely used. They define thematic analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clark 2006, page 83).

I have struggled identifying themes for analysis and while I draw on Papadopolous’ work, I can also recognise my personal struggle in the following quote.

Thematic analysis can be misinterpreted to mean that themes “reside” in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will “emerge” like Venus on the half shell. If themes “reside” anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul 1997, cited in Braun and Clark 2006 page 84).

Although the focus of my research is much narrower, the elements Papadopolous uses to analyse recommodification tendencies are equally valid in my analysis but with some adaptation to the focus of my research. I too spent time waiting for themes to emerge, venus-like, but in that intellectual and physical space where I waited, I continually went back to my Findings and the following themes are the result of my analysis

### **Changes in Discourse**

Ryan (2011 page 1) suggests that ‘discourses are meaning repertoires through which we filter experiences’. She goes on to say ‘dominant discourses characterise ways of talking, writing, thinking, behaving and theorising that prevail at certain times in certain arenas of life’.

I suggest there are significant changes in discourse happening in the world of Adult Education. As I have referred to earlier, the term adult education only occurs once in the SOLAS Action Plan and even then only in reference to the adult education guidance initiative. To what extent we can refer to an adult education service with all its’ theoretical underpinnings is no longer obvious.

One of the focuses in the White Paper is on collective responses to the learning and development needs of people. Concepts such as citizenship, community and participation, all suggest a collective response to a broader understanding of the learning and development needs in society. It also suggests a view of the citizen as more than an economic entity. It would seem now that the strong focus is on the individual and their responsibility to take

control of their lives and that this move towards “employability”, as echoed by two of the participants, is perhaps not the positive interpretation they perceived it to be but is a means of anchoring the reason for unemployment firmly to an individuals’ capacities and capabilities. Expect to hear more of “employability” in the FET sector. Similar to the concept of flexicurity (and indeed an intrinsic aspect of it), it can mean many things to many people.

There is a need to guard against such terms, both because it transfers responsibility to the individuals’ capacities and capabilities and because it implies that the individual is responsible for their unemployment status.

This shift in responsibility towards the individual is in direct contrast to a more critical adult education discourse, which would suggest that it is about identifying the power relationships in society, political, economic or civic, which must be interrogated to identify the source of inequities, oppression and ultimate transformation of power relationships.

In a decommodifying welfare state, labour, state and capital are recognised as social, political and economic entities, mutually interdependent on each other for survival, and the role of the welfare state as outlined earlier by Esping-Anderson, is to introduce decommodifying elements to protect the Labour commodity.

In a recommodifying workfare model, both state and capital are mutually recognised as economic agents and the strength of labour is severely undermined. What were once the social policies of the state in terms of providing decommodifying supports for labour are now viewed only in relation to their economic purpose, both in terms of the economic cost to the state of the payments and the benefit to the economy of utilising “activated and skilled” workers, in the most cost effective manner to the market with minimal enforced protection of labour. The Job-Bridge National Internship programme comes to mind, as does the role of the FET sector to provide skilled workers.

In my analysis of the findings, there is evidence to suggest that AEOs are already aware of this changing discourse but there is also a sense of helplessness and acceptance of the changes. ‘[SOLAS] in conjunction with the likes of enterprise boards and Forfas, will link us in with whatever is needed and coming down the track in terms of skill requirements’. As I referred to in my findings there was an incongruence between the benefits of what research and skills training could provide and at the same time a rejection of an agenda that is driven by skills. Some of this could be an anti FÁS position, but I would suggest that it is indicative

of a response to a new discourse that is ‘both creating and reflecting social reality’ (Lees 1987 cited in Ryan 2011 page 1). And it is an emerging discourse, one that AEOs have clearly not fully embraced, but in acknowledging the benefit of information and research from such august bodies as Forfás and the EGFSN, they are also acknowledging in part the skills discourse.

Another finding, which didn’t seem significant at the time, but is now understandable in light of this change of discourse, was that two of the participants felt that they had lost out on the opportunity to influence decisions that were being made at national level [SOLAS] regarding their sector. One participant in particular suggested strongly that the opportunity to have a say ‘in how our sector should develop appear to have been taken from us’.

#### *Adult Education Discourse*

One of the findings that perhaps surprised me was a lack of clear discourse around what I had perceived to be the role of adult education. This says as much about me and my perceptions about the role of adult education as it does about any analyses of what the participants had to say!

As I referred to in my findings there was a sense of the participants almost surrendering their role as potential catalysts of change, and resigned to a fait accompli.

Adult education for consciousness raising and civic participation and all that, we hope that some of that happens because of the way we do it, but we’re not paid to do it.

As the interviews progressed, there was a strong sense for me that the role of AEO I was familiar with in my working life in the 1990s had changed dramatically. From overworked community responder to overworked manager of adult education team of people operating a series of mutually interdependent programmes.

Grummell et al (2012) refers to the effect of New Managerialism in education. While the authors refer primarily to first, second and third level education, there is little focus on the effects of this business led model on the adult education or FET sector.

I would like to think it was because this sector is the last bastion of resistance against the drive towards neo-liberalism but I am not that naive. It is more likely to be that adult education was seen as the Cinderella of Education and not worthy of being asked to the ball.

However, in the interviews, the participants acknowledged a change in the language around new requirements and working arrangements with SOLAS.

‘Preparing service level agreements will force us to be reflective’.

I expect we will have more performance related targets, already I can see it with the Department [DES], now we are measured against other VECs and whether we are above the average or below the average in BTEI certification for example, that’s something that’s new.

‘It’s all about numbers now’.

‘Service level agreements, key performance indicators, outputs, progression statistics’.

Grummell et al (2012) and Murtagh (2009) suggest that New Public Service Management as a way of governing was introduced in the public service from the 1990s onwards in the form of the Strategic Management Initiative. The effect of this was to promote neo-liberal concepts into our social policies, including education. From the findings one can begin to discern the language of business and the market place seeping into the current adult education provision.

As Ryan (2011) suggests, discourse is also about changing ways of thinking and behaving.

I was at a meeting with the DES shortly after the announcement to establish the ETBs, and you could feel the tension in the room. People were very annoyed about the whole thing. A year later at another meeting everyone was much more animated about the whole with people saying “oh yes, we can do that”. It was amazing the turn around.

Perhaps the discourse has been more firmly adopted than as previously thought.

### **Shifting the balance of power: Labour, State and Capital Implications**

The strong element of conditionality in the governments labour market activation policy, in the form of the record of mutual commitment, for people engaging with Intreo clearly indicates the recommodification process for recipients of Jobseekers allowance and benefit. From the perspective of a power dynamic between labour, state and capital, we are moving from a decommodifying view of social welfare and protection systems as offering safeguards from market forces, to a scenario where protection in the labour market is reduced and labour’s power position vis-a-vis capital is significantly diminished. Consider an additional framework of the flexicurity concept with reduced employment protection and we have a

much reduced power base for labour in and out of employment. Furthermore, the role of trade unions, as traditional protection and voice of labour in the market place, appears to be in a much more precarious position than in halcyon days of social partnership and their role is further diminished as the nature of work and union membership has changed from labour intensive manufacturing to diverse technologies, with a more fluid, flexible and non-unionised workforce.

The responsibility to engage under the record of mutual commitment has resulted, in part, in the drafting of Interim Protocols between VECs and DSP and this process was referred to in the Chapter Five. Generally participants referred to a fairly slow referral rate from DSP which they said suited them as they didn't have the resources to deal with large numbers. The moratorium on recruitment to the VECs restricts opportunities for development and in the event that numbers of people increase (and in all likelihood it will once the Intreo service is rolled out and in place across the country), it will certainly present challenges to the ETBs and some of the anticipated challenges were voiced in the interviews.

‘Class tutors are wondering how to handle all of this in classroom environment.’  
‘If people are being referred in large numbers we won't be able to cope.’

‘I mean we are going to be responsible for peoples' payments being cut if we tell them (DSP) that they didn't turn up for a course.’

### *State and Capital*

As referred to earlier, the role of the state and capital are mutually recognised as economic agents in a recommodifying workforce model (Papadopolous 2005). Grummell et al (2012) describe how under the General Agreement on Trade and Service, the intention is to transform education and other public services into marketable services, and this has been endorsed as an objective in Ireland. Facilitating ‘the private for profit sectors of education [in] expanding even in sensitive areas such as upper second level schooling and teacher education’ (Grummell et al 2012 page 13).

Private sector provision in the adult education service in VECs is uncommon. However, the use of contracted training (private providers) in the training domain is not unusual. So what of the fledgling FET sector?

SOLAS are unambiguous in their intention to utilise private training as required with particular consideration being given in ETB areas which will have a FÁS training centre

allocated. The participants in the research were equally unambiguous in their comments on private training providers.

This needs a complete rethink, A whole industry has grown up around this and some people are making a very nice living out of it and it seems that became the driving force and not necessarily the training need itself.

Another participant made reference to a training provider who had delivered training in a sector where he also had other significant business interests which would benefit from the type of training he provided.

There is clear evidence of a neo-liberal influence in advocating the use of private sector training providers in the realm of adult education. While providers will have quality standards to meet, both from FETAC (now QQI) for certification purposes, FÁS currently, from a public procurement perspective, and no doubt SOLAS will adopt some of these procedures, it would appear that the potential to further dilute adult education provision through the use of private, profit-making organisations requires more careful scrutiny.

The use of private sector provision in the FET sector is also referred to in ‘Pathways to Work’ the government’s labour market activation policy.

Equally concerning, is the reference in ‘Pathways to Work’, to the outsourcing of placement services after a period of activation through Intreo. This policy of outsourcing services to the private sector that been traditionally within the realm of public provision, is worrying, obviously it is happening in many other areas of public services but it seems more deliberately exploitative when one considers that people in receipt of social welfare who will be drawn into this private profit-making sector, will do so at a time of high vulnerability, uncertainty and insecurity in their lives. And while this scenario is currently targeted at people in receipt of jobseekers allowance/benefit, this is the proverbial tip of the iceberg, as it is the government’s stated intention to introduce ‘A Single Working Age Assistance Payment’ (SWAAP). Lone parents and people with disabilities, as happened in the UK (Holden 2004), will eventually be drawn into this skills and activation discourse.

### **Implications for Learners**

‘I think it’s very positive that SOLAS will have a learner charter’.

We will have to wait and see. Unlike the voice of the participant, I don't see a learner charter as being necessarily a positive thing, at the very least it won't do any harm, but for me it is too reminiscent of a neo-liberalism influenced customer charter, which seems to have spread through the public service like a fungus. They are generally comprised of vague sentiments and commitments and yet people are exercised about their development when other more important strategic issues are being decided on and implemented.

I stated earlier in my methodology that one of the issues informing this research was to what extent these changes would affect people's lives. Who is really benefiting? No analysis would be complete without some consideration of the implications for learners. One of the questions I asked in my interview was "who did the AEOs see as being advantaged/disadvantaged in this change process?"

Most participants referred to their existing programmes as being disadvantaged, in particular the 'non-accredited informal programmes'. Another participant replied by saying 'Community education facilitators are vulnerable', but believed the role of the CEFs and the non-accredited programmes lies the heart of adult education – the Community Education Sector. And yet there continues to be a stated commitment to the sector from DES

'...the guidelines for community education have just been issued and it states in black and white that non-formal and informal learning is a key part of community education'.

So there is, at the very least, confusion and uncertainty about the community education sector, but has this not always been the case? – perhaps it always will be.

There is the potential for the FET sector through the activation and referral process to encounter greater numbers of learners and to contribute towards their development in a way that is not just solely about skills. But this will require a strong voice at the policy table

I really think that AONTAS have a role to play in continuing to represent the needs of the community education sector, they will have to argue that it isn't all about economic and skills development.

I would suggest that the AEOS also have a role in this regard.

It seems that, at the moment, the VEC sector is undergoing so many internal changes and challenges that the energy is focused internally on organisational and aggregation matters. It would be difficult to conceive that it could be otherwise at this point in time. But as educators, they have a significant role to play in identifying and responding to the needs of

learners no matter how those needs are presented. Despite, and I would suggest because of, the very challenges that the current economic climate presents to all of us, a critical reflective education intervention for adults, is a necessity not a luxury.

As I outlined in Chapter One, the learners that I am concerned about are not the self-directed, motivated individuals with strong social capital who are focused on what they need and just want an efficient service delivery. They are people who have multiple needs and problems; people who have internalised a sense of failure in themselves as a result of their life experience; people who don't need a vocational skill but need the support of a developmental approach to help them deal with their lives in the first instance. Any FET system which ignores the myriad of social problems that people face, housing, health, participation in violent/abusive relationship, dependency issues and familial difficulties, but instead focuses on acquiring a marketable skill is, in my opinion, going to encounter difficulties. As some of the participants responded, adult education is at a different interface, it is complex, hard to measure and difficult to predict the outcomes, but then too so is life. I leave you with a comment from one of the participants.

It feels to me that adult education is being subsumed by a skills agenda, I heard someone say recently that you can't revitalise an economy with a devitalised society. People are burdened, they feel hopeless. Something that adult education has always done in the past is to give vitality to peoples' spirits, not all of them, they are not a cohesive group, it's their diversity that matters, this person may not go on to get a job but she is managing to keep her kids in school where she wasn't before. Those aspects and wider benefits and offshoots aren't always immediately apparent. Those who were failed the first time deserve the absolute the best the second time.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented an analysis of the findings in an attempt to understand and position the voices of the participants and the world of adult education into a wider theoretical framework of understanding. I drew on the concepts of decommodification and recommodification to suggest that the current discourse in FET represents a strong tendency towards recommodification. Recommodification of labour suggests that many of the welfare state concepts and supports to protect people from reliance on the labour market are gradually being eroded.



The role of adult education is being subsumed at different levels; subsumed by the demands of DSP with provision of educational interventions now more strongly linked with a persons social welfare status in terms of that persons eligibility to participate in education as well as the prospect of compulsory participation or the risk of losing their entitlements; furthermore adult education is at risk of being subsumed into a skills and activation discourse which will dictate provision of educational interventions; it is the influence of market needs which will dominate not just the education sector but also the level of employment protection and security available to workers in an increasingly precarious and unstable employment market. The implications for the learner in this recommodification process cannot be overstated and has, I believe, the potential to create very real tensions for those working in adult education.

Much of this analysis remains to be seen, as new institutions are established and implications of policy changes are experienced by those working in the sector and for learners . There are certainly strong indications through the emergence of a skills discourse within FET that the view of the individual learner as a social citizen is being supplanted by the view of the individual as economic entity. The power relationship between labour, state and market is fundamentally shifting in Ireland with an increasing dominance of the role of market influences.

## **The end of the journey.... and the beginning of another**

Ring your bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in

(Leonard Cohen – Anthem).

I started the MEd the day after I had been to a Leonard Cohen concert, it seems fitting I should end this journey with him.

And it is a conclusion of optimism, despite the often at times pessimistic and despairing analysis throughout this research. I am still optimistic that the participants in this research, the individuals, tutors and trainers, the enlightened decision makers can shine a light.

I have been inspired by the life of Paulo Freire since first encountering his wisdom in 1999 to 2001. I may not have agreed with all his works but I take solace that he worked **within** the system to bring about change rather than as a distant observer or commentator on inequalities, and issues of social justice.

There will be challenges for the AEOs as they come to terms with new structures, responsibilities and new ways of working. They have at the very least the potential, if not the obligation, to assert their voice, even if no one appears to be listening.

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