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## The Triquetra and Apprenticeships: Investigating policy relations

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### Background

Profound changes have taken place in recent decades in the education-to-employment transitions of young people and this is especially so in relation to vocational training, which incorporates key elements of both learning and working. Apprenticeships have seemingly weathered the storm of broader social change and cultural expectations, yet they have also undergone many compositional revisions (Fuller and Unwin, 2009:406). Since the 1970s, the State has shown a renewed interest in apprenticeships and, more recently, high-growth industries such as the creative and cultural sectors have taken on the apprenticeship model of learning, reflecting the contemporary composition of the modern UK labour market. All of this is set against the background of the rise of a “skills system” in the UK and in which apprenticeships play an important role (Department for Businesses, Education and Skills, 2009:2). Yet, in developing a “skills system”, the State has assumed a greater role as organiser of education and employment. Although a skills system can be an important device in promoting equality in the skills spread (Brown, 2001:47), there is also a downside in that it requires active State involvement, which can – and I argue is – resulting in an over-emphasis on the attainment and accumulation of qualifications, which itself becomes the aim, the outcome and the imperative of education and employment practices. In Weberian terms, “the instrumental means of action assumes priority over the ends to be pursued” (Shilling and Mellor, 2001:86). In 2009, the Skills Commission set out three main institutions involved in delivering contemporary apprenticeships: the State, employers and training institutions, what is termed in this research as the ‘triquetra’ of apprenticeship delivery.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to present the ‘triquetra’ as a model of enquiry using the example of my own research into apprenticeships in the creative and cultural and the retail industries. In doing so, apprentices are positioned at the nucleus of the three main institutions of the State, employers and training institutions. The research is part of a PhD position funded by LLAKES (the ESRC Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies) whose focus of enquiry is the learning environments in metropolitan regions within the UK as part of the transition into the ‘knowledge economy’. As such, the broad research considers the implications for knowledge and skill distribution and the impact on, and interrelationship with, social cohesion. By focusing on industries that reflect the city culture, apprenticeship is assessed for its suitability as a model of learning in the aforementioned sectors. The central questions are:

- o How is apprenticeship policy operationalised by the institutional actors?
- o What are the issues central to each of the institutions involved in the delivery of apprenticeships?
- o Where does each institution see opportunities and/or tensions for learning created by these policies?
- o What is the impact of these education policy processes on apprentices’ learning experiences?
- o How adequate is the triquetra as a concept to explain these relationships?

### Methods

The research aims to explore the policy journeys through the actors involved and a mixed methodology is used, including:

- o Discourse analysis of available documents, data and artefacts from each of the institutions and in addition to resources available from external sources
- o Interviews with key actors and apprentices

### **Frame**

The analytical device of the triquetra provides the early researcher with an initial tool of investigation and has been developed in order to assist research into the relationships between three institutional actors, whilst keeping the central actor – the apprentices - at the centre. The triquetra therefore has three applications demonstrated through the research:

- o It serves a descriptive function, setting out graphically the existence and inter-relationships of the three institutional actors and the apprentices.
- o Secondly, the triquetra becomes an analytical framework for observing relationships that exist between the three institutions and between each institution and the apprentice, with the aim of providing a greater understanding of the roles of institutions on the apprentices within the industries. Furthermore, the triquetra provides an administrative device for maintaining focus for the researcher on the key elements, which can be of particular benefit to early researchers.
- o Thirdly, it is a conceptual tool by which it has been possible to observe the point in time at which new allegiances were formed between the three institutions, through government policy reactions to the problems of youth unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s, and from which young people became subject to much closer government scrutiny and control.

Foucauldian theories of power and control are used to explore the issues which arise – the benefits and the barriers – in the delivery of apprenticeship as a model for learning in the knowledge economy.

### **Research findings**

This paper will argue that the triquetra allows both early and seasoned researchers to present relationships diagrammatically in ways that simple triangular forms do not. It is also one that simultaneously permits researchers to consider their work in broader conceptual terms and to consider different aspects of the relationships within the broader picture. In the case of this research, the triquetra is used to investigate the implementation of vocational training policy in order to elicit the major issues involved in work-based learning policy in the creative and cultural industries and to study how training and associated life-chances of the apprentices are understood by each of the actors. As such, the research looks at the benefits and problems associated with modern apprenticeships.

### **References**

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