



BAICE Thematic Forum

Challenging deficit discourses in international education and development

2015

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BAICE Thematic Forum

Challenging deficit discourses in international education and development 2015

Research and policy in international education has often been framed in terms of a deficit discourse. For instance, policy debates on women’s literacy and education have begun by positioning women as a group who need to ‘catch up’ on certain skills in order to become more active in development. Rather than recognising the skills and knowledge that participants already have and practise in their everyday lives, researchers who adopt this deficit perspective on learning and education may find that the research agenda and questions will already be shaped to a large extent by the providers’/ policy makers’ standpoint.

This BAICE Thematic Forum aimed to deepen understanding around how deficit discourses have shaped the questions and objectives of international educational research. As well as deconstructing and gaining greater knowledge into why and how these dominant deficit discourses have influenced the research agenda, we also set out to investigate and propose alternative conceptual models through **two linked seminars**. The seminars were intended to explore and challenge dominant deficit discourses that have shaped the way researchers/policy makers look at specific **groups** in development and **thematic** policy areas.

The Thematic Forum was organised by a team from the Literacy and Development Group*, University of East Anglia and University of Leeds: Anna Robinson-Pant, Caroline Dyer, Nitya Rao, Sheila Aikman, Alan Rogers and Spyros Themelis. A grant from BAICE provided funding for the seminars, including travel bursaries for speakers and student participants.

*The UEA Literacy and Development Group was set up in 2003 to bring together researchers working across the University of East Anglia and wider afield who share a ‘social practice’ approach to literacy. The group now has a national and international profile, established through commissioned research for international agencies (particularly UNESCO), convening international conferences and publications on adult learning, literacy and development.



Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Nur Huslinda Che Mat, Vivemarlyne Mudin, Ahmmardouh Mjaya and Isabelle Mudge for their detailed notes on which part of this report is based. Thanks also to Qingru Wang and Kana Takahashi for photographs of the seminars. Miriam McGregor provided excellent administrative support and design work for the seminars.



BAICE Thematic Forum SEMINAR 1

Leeds University 22nd April 2015

Flourishing on the margins? Challenging discourses of group-based deficit

This seminar explored the ways in which particular groups of learners are constructed and (mis)represented in discourses of policy and advocacy, asking why their visibility is often achieved through deficit labelling and what implication this has for them. It opened with context setting, revisiting the key themes of the 2012 Compare Special Issue (42, 2): Developing Education, Challenging Marginalisation and issues that Sheila and Caroline raised in their editorial 'Education and Inclusion: re-examining the narratives'. This framing stressed that education is a moral and political undertaking, and emphasised the importance of understanding the underlying value frameworks that shape assumptions being made about education and the normative expectations bestowed on it. These

include: the ability of 'education' to change lives, broaden individuals' freedoms of choice and action, lifting people out of poverty. It questioned the widely held belief that a lack of 'education' is a source of acute and persistent disadvantage.

It was noted further that high profile policy/education advocacy publications have begun to equate 'education deprivation' with being 'vulnerable'. The World Bank's 2011 Learning for All document for example reinforces the equation of education with schooling, seen as 'the best tool for unleashing the potential of the human mind', which then leads to a targeting of so-called poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. The discourse of the High Level Panel (2013) reinforces a categorisation of

groups with relatively low levels of schooling as 'vulnerable', including indigenous peoples, girls and women, ethnic minorities and Dalits, migrants, victims of gender-based violence, LGBTQI, small scale farmers, women, unemployed and the urban poor. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for 'the vulnerable', a category which is explained to include persons with disability, indigenous peoples and 'girls in vulnerable situations'.

Following the framing overview, the seminar heard and responded to a series of twinned presentations.

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Sheila Aikman (UEA) and Tristan McCowan (IoE) focused on indigenous peoples

Sheila pointed out that indigenous peoples are a 'deficit category' within mainstream educational discourses, policies and practices, whereby they are externally defined as 'vulnerable'. However, indigenous peoples are diverse, multiple, and changing.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes the right to education in several forms including, but not exclusively, schooling.

Education for and by indigenous peoples in Latin America has been shaped through indigenous movements and the emergence over the past twenty years of intercultural bilingual education (IBE) as a modality for and by indigenous peoples which recognises diversity of knowledge, learning and participation in terms of self-determination. However, there are increasingly strong critiques of the ways in which IBE has been co-opted by mainstream educational institutions and policy makers, undermining its potential to challenge dominant epistemologies and ontologies. She discussed how advocacy for mother tongue language education

(MTLE) can reflect diverse conceptual and disciplinary priorities, each with quite different aims and outcomes for learners and for languages:

- a) MTLE for indigenous language maintenance and improved educational learning outcomes, emerging from educational and sociolinguistic research and discourses of language(s) as a 'resource'.
- b) MTLE as a transitional strategy using the mother tongue as a springboard to further language learning and educational attainment in the dominant language. Mother tongue language speakers are associated with discourses of deficit and vulnerability and their languages often seen as a problem and barrier for achieving the 'basics'.
- c) Indigenous language rights and priorities for 'saving indigenous languages' associated with debates about linguisticism and ethnocide and post-colonial critiques. Emerging from discourses of language rights

and language 'vulnerability', concerns are about language loss and disappearance; and of teaching languages and literacy for their regeneration and preservation.

- d) Indigenous language rights and languages as practice and communication, emerging from post-structural conceptions of indigenous peoples' plurilingual language repertoires. The focus is on the way individuals construct and use repertoires of languages and how these are fluid and changing.

Sheila then highlighted the importance of ethnographic research on language and educational practices which takes into account the complexity of the rapidly changing social and economic contexts within which indigenous peoples live today, and challenging simplistic dualities which reinforce deficits.



Cecilia Farinango, Former Director of IBE, Imabura Province, Ecuador (L) and Carmen Alosilla Morales, Intercultural Educator Cuzco, Peru (R) at a Quichua Intercultural Bilingual School, Ecuador

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Tristan focused on Indigenous Peoples and education in Brazil. He began by calling attention to historically located developments in Brazil and tensions between universal provision and specialist/ separate provision of education, where the latter may raise concerns about segregation.

Post 1988 in Brazil democratic governments began to be concerned with universal provision and how to achieve this. With only some 800,000 people self-defining as indigenous they are a small minority in Brazil but significant in terms of their affirmative action and social movements.

Indigenous peoples are working to challenge traditional dominant forms of higher education and build programmes around indigenous forms of knowledge and learning. They have made gains in community based education and recognition of and autonomy of indigenous schools based upon their values and worldviews. Important gains include the emergence of:

- i) research-based curricula, organised and defined by indigenous communities themselves for their own schools which are not bound by public legislation to specific curriculum but have public funding; and
- ii) opportunities for higher education and the creation of a new kind of institution, which values different concepts of knowledge including for example environmental stewardship, narratives of origin and contemporary indigenous economies.

There are important parallels and differences with the initiatives and challenges being made here in both schooling and higher education with developments in other parts of Latin America, such as Mexico. There has been important work with the University of Sao Paulo and new collaborations between indigenous peoples and their organisations and indigenous and non-indigenous staff, opening up new directions and conceptions of 'intercultural dialogue'.



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Caroline Dyer (Leeds), Patta Scott-Villiers (IDS) and Spyros Themelis (UEA) looked at 'nomadic' groups

Caroline and **Patta** considered mobile pastoralists. **Caroline** focused on the 'hard to reach' learner discourse of policy, which constructs the mobile learner as the problem, rather than the models of formalised education provision that do not 'reach' learners and, further, are of questionable relevance to them. Mobile pastoralists are viewed from the perspective of the state as posing a question of spatial reach. Discussions about reach typically translate into concerns over access and a search for innovative models of access – such as mobile schools, or Open and Distance provision. Achieving EFA pledges also typically relies on state-non-state partnership modalities to offer more flexible provision, but these forms of provision are sporadic and very poorly documented, raising many questions about accountability to learners / for learning. There is less questioning of the relevance of what is to be reached and through what means, and what pastoralists consider valuable learning in the contexts of their specific livelihoods. The livelihoods dimension of pastoralism – how mobility and labour organisation work together as

a livelihood strategy - is poorly understood in the education sector. Schooling is in tension with requirements for children's work and situated learning of pastoralist's livelihoods and lifestyles. At worst this can mean that endogenous education - on the job learning to be a pastoralist - is seen as child labour.

Focusing specifically on India, Caroline pointed out that since colonial times, mobile livelihoods have been seen as problematic and had an association with criminality. Many pastoralists have begun to see themselves as backward, reflecting the ways non-pastoralists/sedentary people see their mobile livelihood and the association of schooling with being modern and having a valued social identity. She noted that when schooling serves only the purpose of education out of pastoralism, it implicitly delegitimises pastoralist livelihoods and their social identity. Land grabbing in Western India is increasingly requiring pastoralists to sedentarise and they do enrol in schools, yet the quality of that schooling is generally very poor.

Patta reinforced these issues with a set of examples from Northern Kenya, which showed a remarkably wide range of parallels. She also showed further the ways in which education as schooling reinforced a lack of self-worth. She noted that teaching can be not merely out of pastoralism, as Caroline had discussed, but also anti-pastoralism. Reflecting on alternatives, she described Islamic schools (*dugsis* – where a Koranic teacher travels with groups) which show that mobile education is entirely possible if it fulfils a need for learning.

Spyros considered the deficit labelling of European Roma and the policy level. With formerly segregated educational arrangements and very low levels of academic achievement Roma have been the target of various remedial programmes, mediation programmes and coaching for their greater inclusion. Meanwhile, Roma people (and their voices) remain invisible/ silent despite a policy 'frenzy', seen through different strategies for inclusion through the 2005-15 Decade for Roma and a need by policy makers to be seen to be doing something

towards their educational [enlightenment]. Included here is documentation of models of education. Spyros introduced a new initiative with funding from the European Union and the Soros-funded Open Society Foundation which aims to give European Roma a higher profile and a stage (literally) but which emerges from an approach that amounts to a 'folklorification' of the traditional notion of Gypsy-as-performer which, in turn, raises further concerns.



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The next set of short presenters, Purna Kumar Shrestha (VSO) and Catherine Jere (GMR) focused on deficit labels associated with disability and orphans and vulnerable children

Purna focused on VSO's work in Myanmar and 'disability', emphasising the importance of the ways in which different inequalities intersect in individuals' lives and that single categories are of limited analytical value. Many children in Myanmar and other low income countries with disabilities are out of school. In VSO's work they have found that the policy discourse across education policy documents is very similar and that the major focus is on curriculum and assessment but in the very narrow terms of learning outcomes in numeracy and literacy. This policy discourse is tied up with a narrow consideration of what is quality education in the context of 'disability'. Furthermore a lack of interaction between Ministries in Myanmar means that there is no coordinated approach to thinking about or developing quality education – schooling – for learners with disabilities. This situation is to ignore the diverse and complex nature of disabilities and the urgent need for more complex and coordinated responses than exist at present. In the current context, social stigma continues

to be strong and for those learners with disabilities who do access schooling their inability to complete this schooling should be seen as resulting from forces which push them out rather than 'drop out'.

Kate reflected on Malawi as her context for problematizing the category and label 'orphans and vulnerable children' (OVC). She raised the importance of understanding how and where these categories emerge from and the meanings they acquire or bring to different contexts. In Malawi there are many OVC programmes, which have developed within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, donor support and Western-dominated aid policy. The term orphan – and the conjunction OVC - used by donors is distinct from the concept of orphan and the nature of orphanhood in Malawi. This externally driven agenda ignores the complex parenting and care situations on the ground in Malawi and, moreover, creates a false dichotomy of orphan/ non-orphan. Children affected by HIV/ AIDS in other ways, such as those caring for chronically ill adults, are largely

invisible within policy and welfare-based programming, such as school-feeding or bursaries. The OVC category also positions these children as 'other' and stigmatises. Such programmes and approaches reinforce within the school a notion of orphans as victims to circumstances and conditions external to the school. Consequently teachers and school leaders fail to address exclusionary practices within schools and there is little or no psycho-social support provided.

Donor programmes working with this category of OVC maintain and perpetuate it through for example the collection of statistics on orphans, which are then used to design school-feeding programmes. This in turn perpetuates a sense of group-based deficit. Such as strong normative stance with its crude labels reinforces marginalising discourses based on preconceived notions of gender and vulnerability to the exclusion of research and policy on issues of resilience or agency, or the ways in which 'OVC's have high expectations of schooling and often drop in and drop out of school. Thus a

focus on educational 'barriers' obscure the coping strategies, opportunities and mechanisms which these 'OVC's and others affected by HIV and AIDS employ to maintain access to schooling during difficult periods in their lives – reinforced by deficit labelling of children who return to schooling after death of parent(s).



Moving the focus to adult learners, Amy North (UCL IOE) and Katy Newell-Jones (Feed The Minds) discussed labelling of migrant workers and illiteracy

Amy presented her research with a small group of migrant domestic workers from Nepal living and working in the UK and considered how with little or no prior formal education they negotiated the learning support they valued. Ethnographic and life history research offered insights into the way in which despite being labelled as illiterate and unskilled, the women were knowledgeable, articulate and reflective about their experiences as domestic workers and transnational women. Challenging dominant discourses of both illiterate women and unskilled migrants, these women, who spoke as many as five different languages, had negotiated with immigration authorities and employers across the globe, and, though their remittances had bought property and funded schooling for family members in their home communities. Media images and persistent UK anti-immigrant discourses tend to present such unskilled migrant women either as "benefits scroungers" or as victims, as trafficked, as vulnerable. The more complex, detailed and intricate picture is of women who, despite enduring exploitation

and difficult working conditions as well as the pain of separation from their families, had managed to learn English, negotiate the literacy support they need, and draw on the extensive social networks they developed across the UK and the globe, to exert their agency and demonstrate their resilience.

Katy problematised illiteracy as a deficit concept and discourse of 'illiterates' as having limited literacy practices – despite great theoretical advances in understanding literacies as pluralistic and on a continuum rather than the persisting and inaccurate binary literate/illiterate divide. She argues that 'illiterates' are seen as wasteful of resources and 'illiteracy' as a multiplier of disadvantage. Within this concept of disadvantage and deficit, where non-literacy as a barrier is a dominant frame of thinking among educated people, individuals self-label in terms of deficit and exclusion. In many countries literacy is a prerequisite for achieving other rights – e.g. in Rwanda for registering for land rights. Since the 1990s the focus on education for development

has strengthened the focus of literacy programmes on developing skills but these programmes tend to focus on very narrow testing, such as that carried out through the UNESCO LAMP programme and are inadequate for participation and a wider contribution towards empowerment. She also reflected on rights, noting that universal declarations themselves compound the deficit discourses, taking for example the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which focuses on eliminating ignorance/illiteracy.

Seminar discussion

Break-out groups then considered the themes that ran across the short presentations and led into the plenary session. Ironically, deficit discourses themselves reflect a meta-narrative of 'inclusion': it is no coincidence that they are most in evidence when projects of universal education inclusion fail. The discourse of deficit accompanies attention to those who appear to have been left out; swiftly grouping them and then assuming one – or several – group characteristics. No diagnosis of 'deficit' is neutral: it is embedded in biases of culture, class, gender, age, race, ethnicity etc. which legitimise particular models of education and delegitimise others, producing *en route* 'failures' or 'difficult' groups (for example, indigenous populations do not do well in schools). Yet 'deficit discourse' can also lead to over-representation of marginalised groups in 'alternative' education systems: while such systems intend to address specific issues and provide flexible education, there is still a danger of creating hierarchical system of education which leaves 'mainstream' education as the most legitimate option and alternative education as an 'inclusive'

option for those that most trouble its normative assumptions. For example: since the key deficit for pastoralists is assumed to be mobility, mobile schools are seen to be an answer; for indigenous groups, intercultural bilingual schools are promoted.

While, as established through the many examples explored in the discussion, many labels have negative connotations, can they also be positive. Uma Pradhan reflected on research on mother tongue education in Nepal, where groups use the term 'ethnic group', 'indigenous group' to claim a distinctive identity as part of a self-making process used to demand justice and make claims on the state. Using those very labels of disadvantage helps them draw attention towards the oversight by the state and put the spotlight on the otherwise forgotten population. Further, appropriating those labels re-signifies them as positive identities - demanding equality on the basis of the very grounds on which it had previously been denied.

Building on the characterisation of deficits, the plenary reflected on the need to pay more attention to uses of by now well established labels, and particularly how people thus identified engage with such characterisation. Attending to who is utilising these labels and for what purposes reveals not only that they can restrict opportunities, but also that they can be used to expand them. Reflections on language among indigenous peoples showed, for example, that mother-tongue education can be used to create separation of different groups and differential access to education; but conversely, to bring local languages/ identities into national education frameworks and transform the terms on which they are represented.

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BAICE Thematic Forum SEMINAR 2

University of East Anglia 6th May 2015

Invisible or hidden? Challenging discourses around 'skills deficit'

This seminar explored dominant policy discourses around skills development and training programmes in international education and development. We examined how such discourses are constructed from a perceived deficit of vocational education and training opportunities, rendering existing skills, literacy practices and skills development processes invisible.

The seminar began with two plenary presentations on current dominant policy discourses on TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) (Simon McGrath) and a critique from the perspective of informal learning and skill development (Alan Rogers). We then moved into three groups to discuss the following three sub-themes in relation to discourses on 'skills'.

BAICE THEMATIC FORUM
Invisible or hidden? Challenging discourses around 'skills deficit'

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS
Professor Simon McGrath, University of Nottingham
No NEET solutions: youth, skills and employability
The orthodox vocational education and training account is redolent with language of deficit and moral culpability. Millions of young people are designated negatively as NEETs – not in employment, education and training – whilst public providers are routinely castigated for their failure to make these underperforming poor into good citizen-consumers by addressing their employability. Moreover, this account reduces young adults to narrow and atomistic economic individuals, rather than fully authentic humans existing in society. This presentation will suggest that a human development and capability reading can offer a richer alternative account that better balances agency and structure, and which gives work due prominence without reducing life to the economic sphere.

Professor Alan Rogers, University of East Anglia
'Skills deficit': what skills deficit? Looking again at skills in development from the bottom up
In this presentation, drawing on experience of development programmes from the folk development colleges of Tanzania to more recent work in Afghanistan, I would like to re-examine three assumptions about skills in development programmes: a) the concept of widespread skills deficit at all levels, from individual to national, by pointing to the (largely tacit) funds of knowledge and banks of skills which trainees bring with them; b) the discourse of a deficit in vocational training by pointing to the ways these funds of knowledge and banks of skills have been learned through existing informal learning and traditional informal educational skills development activities in many societies; and c) the assumption that a minimum level of basic skills are required before vocational training can be effective by exploring the concept of embedded literacies and numeracies.

Wednesday 6th May 2015
UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA
REGISTRATION Please contact the BAICE Support Officer
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UEA University of East Anglia BAICE

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1. Opening plenary session

Simon McGrath, University of Nottingham No NEET solutions: youth, skills and employability

ABSTRACT

The orthodox vocational education and training account is redolent with language of deficit and moral culpability. Millions of young people are designated negatively as NEETS- not in employment, education and training - whilst public providers are routinely castigated for their failure to make these undeserving poor into good citizen-consumers by addressing their employability. Moreover, this account reduces young adults to narrow and atomistic economic individuals, rather than fully authentic humans existing in society. This presentation will suggest that a human development and capability reading can offer a richer alternative account that better balances agency and structure, and which gives work due prominence without reducing life to the economic sphere.

Forum participants supported Simon's strong argument for moving away from negative labels like 'NEET' and emphasised the need for a broader understanding of 'work'. Deficit discourses around skills have been constructed due to adopting a narrow definition of work as 'jobs'. As Simon suggested, the goal of TVET should be around 'flourishing lives', expanding opportunities for developing new capabilities – rather than a narrow focus on contribution to the economy. Hardly any research asks learners what they aspire to: 'we need a new set of evaluative questions' – an alternative to labelling both learners and institutions as 'failures'. The following points were also raised in discussion:

- Who is vocational education for? Often those groups defined through a 'deficit' perspective (see BTF 1) – working class, blacks – have been the targets of such programmes. There seems to be an assumption that certain groups cannot aspire to have Aristotle's notion of a 'good life'

(as being more than getting a job), but should just provide the skills to support economic development. We need to look too at the colonial legacy of vocational education in countries like Kenya and how this model can be broken.

- Who is creating and perpetuating these dominant discourses on TVET? It is important to 'talk back' to such organisations and agencies, showing what works and what fails. We need to ask, for instance, where is the evidence that national qualification frameworks have been successful? Technical solutions are being sought to address complex social problems and the British have been a major player/exporter of such models.

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Alan Rogers, University of East Anglia 'Skills deficit': what skills deficit? Looking again at skills in development from the bottom up

ABSTRACT

In this presentation, drawing on experience of development programmes from the folk development colleges of Tanzania to more recent work in Afghanistan, I would like to re-examine three assumptions about skills in development programmes: a) the concept of widespread skills deficit at all levels, from individual to national, by pointing to the (largely tacit) funds of knowledge and banks of skills which trainees bring with them; b) the discourse of a deficit in vocational training by pointing to the ways these funds of knowledge and banks of skills have been learned through existing informal learning and traditional informal educational skills development activities in many societies; and c) the assumption that a minimum level of basic skills are required before vocational training can be effective by exploring the concept of embedded literacies and numeracies.

Alan argued that the deficit discourse was caused by a narrow definition of skills, training and literacy in policy. In particular, a dominant approach was to advise people seeking VET opportunities and other support for livelihoods that 'they must go and learn literacy first'. This approach ignored the ways in which people already engage in literacy practices and learn informally in everyday situations – for example, the rapid growth in learning how to use mobile phones. Alan suggested that we need to 'make visible the 'hidden' learning which trainees bring to their programmes', rather than assuming that all learning takes place in formal or nonformal programmes. We need to consider the context within which training takes place and understand participants' aspirations. Questions raised in discussion included:

- Who is considered literate? What is literacy? We need to draw a very clear distinction between language learning and literacy learning – in some contexts, if someone is not able to write English, they may be

considered 'illiterate'. What are the implications of looking only at literacy as the means to do something else? This idea of 'embedded literacy' could be limiting and we need to ensure that the process of literacy learning is empowering.

- What about hierarchies of skills and how do changing social values influence deficit discourses? Is it really 'hidden' literacy or skills, or is this about what is valued in society? An example was given from Nepal of how parents used to discourage children from becoming tailors as it was a low caste occupation. However now that there are new boutiques and diplomas in fashion, this is a more desirable area of work.

Overall discussion

In conclusion, Forum participants reflected on the limitations of either 'reproducing or resisting the way of the state' and considered what alternatives there could be. Formal education has 'winners and losers' built into the system so inequalities and deficit discourses are inevitable. Is it pointless to talk back in a policy space? Perhaps policy is not the answer and we need to find alternative spaces to facilitate change.

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2. Thematic group discussions

At this point, we divided into smaller group discussions. The seminar participants were invited to examine more closely the representations of participants in skills development programmes and the other contexts outlined below, in order to explore alternatives that can promote more effective learning.

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Facilitated by Purna Shrestha (VSO) and Anna Robinson-Pant (UEA). Rapporteurs: Frederick Odindo (UEA) and Charlotte Martin

This group began by looking at deficit discourses around academic reading, writing and analysis skills in a range of organisational contexts, including volunteers in international development programme and students in universities. The aim was to explore assumptions around skills, skill development and skill exchange in these specific contexts as the basis for looking at processes of informal learning. Issues to emerge from the discussion included:

- Academic language is more or less like a 'closed shop' and therefore creates some kind of a barrier for students, including professionals who have been used to writing reports and other texts in the workplace.
- Written language is typically valued more than what is expressed orally within UK higher education, and this may differ from other cultural contexts. Examples were given of UK professionals going to work in other countries as volunteers who had to learn to place higher value on oral communication in their work there.
- Is academic identity trapped in the past? There was concern that just learning a set of rules for academic writing could inhibit creativity.
- Awareness of cultural diversity among the students was considered vital for staff when dealing with academic skills.
- Essay writing often valued more than other forms of assessment and wondered whether it was now time to find other ways of assessing students' competences.
- The deficit model puts much emphasis on the teachers and projects students as empty vessels. We need to recognise and value the practices and knowledge that students bring with them. Many learners have resources if given the chance – but we have to listen to them.



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LIVELIHOOD SKILLS AND MIGRATION

Facilitated by Ian Cheffy (SIL International) and Nitya Rao (UEA). Rapporteur: Isabelle Mudge (UEA)

This group explored policy discourses on skills for improved livelihoods, particularly within the context of increasing migration and globalisation of economies. The aim was to look at both formal and informal learning processes to understand how people are developing skills for and through migration. The main discussion points included:

- Movement and mobility was the key dimension of this particular perspective on 'deficit discourses'. Questions central to our discussion were 'what skills are valuable?' and 'who decides what is valuable?'
- There is a hierarchy of skilled people and that these are valued differently. For instance, English language teachers from a 'native-speaking' country are considered to be highly valued in some parts of the world, even if they do not have professional qualifications.
- There is a need to identify the skills that are required and for whom. An example was given of individuals who migrate and need to adapt to a new culture (intercultural learning). Also the importance of 'negotiating' skills, learning to interact and socialise with others to acquire vital social capital.
- Vocational education and training skills are not transferable, i.e. one cannot use them to enrol in mainstream formal education. Examples were given from China where migrants received a certificate on completion of their non-formal course but this only had 'symbolic' value compared to certificates from formal education courses.
- There can be a disjuncture between the language skills acquired and those needed for employment.



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DIGITAL SKILLS

Facilitated by Alex Kendall (Birmingham City University) and Alan Rogers (UEA).
Rapporteur: Spyros Themelis (UEA)

This group examined discourses on digital literacy skills, in the context of the growing importance of social media and spread of ICT. The aim was to consider ICT not only in terms of 'skills' that are required for economic growth but also as alternative modes of learning and communication.

Participants noted that:

- There were differences in the use and learning of technology i.e. individual and community use; formal and informal learning.
- The social media was creating new ways of communicating, being, and doing things. New groups are forming new networks for their own ends.
- New technologies are leading to alternative and innovative ways of using language and new modalities of learning and communicating. New technologies are supporting informal learning, such as the use of Twitter to pursue common goals.

- Technologies were providing some means of escaping marginality (creating new identities)
- When talking about digital skills there is need to make a distinction between ability to use the technology and knowledge of the operating systems
- There is need to do more studies exploring what technology means and on whether technologies always bring about positive outcomes.

At the end of the plenary report-back session, it was noted that the 'digital skills' group had been 'less negative' in terms of the points emerging – maybe due to this being 'a path less travelled'.



3. Plenary Panel

The panel reflected on the Forum discussions in the light of their own experiences and in terms of making connections with the BAICE Thematic Forum at Leeds.

Demelash Woldu (UEA/formerly UNESCO Ethiopia Education Program Coordinator) reflected that EFA is the driving force behind national policy making in many countries and that deficit discourses have led to the neglect of certain marginalized groups, such as pastoralists in Ethiopia. The post-2015 development agenda may offer an opportunity to highlight these issues around marginalisation.

Simon McGrath (University of Nottingham) noted that it is currently a 'double moment' for UNESCO - bringing together their adult literacy and vocational education expertise and grappling with the 'old TVET orthodoxy'. To what extent is it useful to talk back to policy? If UNESCO recommendations look more progressive in the end, what does that amount to? Is policy impact a good thing?

From his experience in development, **Ian Cheffy (SIL International)** observed that change does happen – but slowly. UNESCO has adopted a more sophisticated understanding of adult education and the notion of 'literacies', for instance, is now more mainstream. Comparing the two seminars, he suggested that whereas in Leeds we focused on the 'victims' of deficit discourses, at UEA we were looking at the 'perpetrators' of those discourses.

Purna Shrestha (VSO) brought politics back into the picture, emphasising that development is about political will and that we need to recognise the power dynamics influencing these discourses. Technology is a good example – even if people have access to a computer, due to language barriers and the dominance of English they may not be able to access the information.

Spyros Themelis (UEA) began with the tensions between the local and global, suggesting that 'new grammars of communication' created through social media open the possibility for a 'trickle up' effect on policy. How much policy making of the future will be framed by this deficit discourse? It is also possible to be optimistic – that people are not just resisting but reading a new interface between local and global through movements such as the Arab Spring.

4. Next steps

At the end of the second seminar, we discussed how to take forward the BAICE thematic forum through follow-up advocacy, publication and research activities.

- Network to be established, particularly for the 3rd sector to liaise with DFID and other donors. This could be an interest group focused on youth employment and training.
- The Forum could be linked/feed into ongoing UKFIET activities, such as a Skills Conversation.
- A Compare Forum has been agreed with reflective pieces based on the two Thematic Forums – contact Nitya Rao for further details.

Feedback on the Thematic Forum seminars included:

- This has been an opportunity to discuss the wider context of, for instance, literacy and skills development, and enable us to make connections across sectors which are often discrete.
- For those based outside academic institutions, the Forum provided a space to engage with theoretical ideas around deficit discourses.
- We are often having similar but separate conversations in NGOs and the Academy. This was a chance to have a conversation together.
- It was very positive to include research students as well as NGOs and academic staff in the two Forums.

- The interactive format increased participation and interaction among participants.
- Both seminars generated ideas and interest in further collaborative working and thinking on this theme.

Thanks to all those who participated in the Forum and we look forward to others joining us in the proposed follow-up activities.

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Printed by UEA Print Group

Design and typesetting Miriam McGregor

Unless otherwise noted, the photographs/images used originate from participants' archives.

