

Chapter 8

PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

Why you might find these projects interesting

The projects in this chapter fall into a 7-year period between 1995 and 2002, and in political terms these were turbulent times – the final days of 17 years of Conservative Party rule (Margaret Thatcher and John Major) and the opening period of ‘New Labour’ under Tony Blair.

The first two projects were commissioned by the Design Council (reinvigorated by the policy success of linking ‘cool Britannia’ to ‘New Labour’) and centred on the power of design thinking in non-design settings. In the first we explored management decision making: would it be more creative if it had more of the features of designerly decision making? In the second we explored the reciprocal question of what designers are good at other than designing. Both projects played into a public interest, and hence a public policy agenda.

The middle project was commissioned by the Department for Education & Skills. The success of design & technology had outrun our ability to recruit teachers and we were asked to undertake a research study to identify new sources of appropriately skilled teachers.

The final two projects were commissioned by the Engineering Council UK and both were linked to recruitment issues. The first explored what kinds of mathematics – and at what levels – is learned through design & technology. This was important in particular for admission to engineering degree programmes. The second provided a moment of reflection. While ‘New Labour’ was explicitly positioning the UK as a ‘knowledge economy’, what were the consequences of this for design & technology and for the engineering world?

1. TERU AND THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC POLICY

The environment in schools in the first half of the 1990s was extremely troubled. The National Curriculum had been introduced in 1990 and it involved far reaching transformations of practice for teachers. The whole curriculum was now circumscribed into ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects – with design & technology sitting somewhere between these two groupings as part of what Ministers referred to as the ‘extended core’. By the mid-1990s design & technology had become a fixed point on the educational landscape. Having escaped from the obscurity imposed by its fractured history, design & technology – as a single entity – began to assert itself into areas of public life.

Public policy research is typically funded by research councils, but there are other organisations with research-related remits for public policy, including of course government departments. We include in this chapter an account of a policy-related project for the Department of Education & Skills concerning the issue of teacher supply. Why is there a shortage of appropriately qualified recruits for teaching and why in particular is the shortage so acute in design & technology?

Beyond government departments there are organisations whose concerns are directly involved with design & technology, and whose activities sit at the public/professional interface, and the two most obvious are the Design Council and the Engineering Council UK. These bodies in addition to having some responsibility for managing, promoting, or regulating their professions, also have a brief to inform and educate the general public about their activities. To that extent they are involved in informing and influencing public policy and we describe in this chapter two projects that we have conducted for each of these bodies.

2. DECISIONS BY DESIGN (1995–1997)

2.1 Context

In 1994, the Design Council launched an initiative entitled ‘Total School Design’. This initiative invited practitioners, teachers and researchers to speculate on the many ways in which design might impact upon schools. The invitation for proposals therefore went well beyond the former territory of the Design Council concerning curriculum support for design teaching, and invited wider scale thinking. Within TERU we were pleased with this widening of the scope of design-related research and we proposed a project that explored decision making in schools. Specifically, we were interested in