

POLICY WATCH

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Current developments towards implementation of 14 - 19 reform in local authorities. A LEACAN Report

So what's it looking like at street level? Away from the sharp headlights of national policy and public pronouncements how are 14 - 19 developments shaping up on the ground? This useful piece of research from LEACAN offers an interesting picture. The remit for the research project says it all; 'how to get from A to Z without a map or a compass, where A is a variable and Z is unknown.' The sense of being on a busy highway but without many directions shines through.

The research was carried out during the first half of this year so perhaps the freeway image is not surprising. Using largely questionnaires, the brief was to look at "the current positioning and delivery of the 14 - 19 agenda at local levels with reference to delivery frameworks, partnership arrangements and strategic planning." 56 Local Authorities responded, 37% of the total in England. Copies of the Report are available from wendyworviell@yahoo.co.uk.

LEACAN, which is a national network of local officers, has a specific interest in 14 - 19 developments and has a key role to play not just in carrying the messages to the nether regions but in managing much of the implementation as well. Much of its work over the last 20 years has been focused on this area so it is well positioned.

The Report, which is presented under two main headings, a quantitative review of current vocational provision and a qualitative overview of progress towards the 2013 entitlement, makes four recommendations. Firstly, under coherent strategic planning, a need to build on lessons from the past, CPVE, TVEI and all that, and bring a sense of order to strategic planning. Secondly, to develop a more appropriate performance framework, one in which the new drivers and accountabilities are recognised. Thirdly, to strengthen communication strategies so that 'the profile of what these reforms mean is more clearly understood.' And finally, at a time of considerable upheaval with such diverse factors as Building Schools for the Future and the demographic downturn, the need to build carefully for the future. "Concern about the capacity to meet the expectations of the national entitlement was the second most significant barrier identified."

In fact six "barriers to implementing specialised Diplomas and the national entitlement" were identified from the responses received.

The first, pointedly, was "the engagement and willingness of schools to engage with the 14 - 19 agenda." This was not to suggest that schools were sitting back and doing nothing, if anything the opposite, trying to cope with a battery of initiatives although heads and sand were not far away from some responses. There are some interesting sub texts here. Firstly a post Tomlinson disenchantment still seems to be in evidence; there's a worry about a two tier approach with successful, academic schools carrying on as before and the rest taking up Diplomas.

Secondly, it's evident that starting points vary enormously; some schools have well established vocational programmes and trained staff, others do not. Most schools that do offer vocational provision offer 2 - 3 sector lines with Health and Social Care, Sport and Leisure, Hair and Beauty, Business Admin, ICT and Engineering among the most popular but much seems to depend on staff expertise and local planning arrangements. All of which suggests Local Authority planning will play an important role in steering what is offered and where.

The second barrier was capacity and skill. Again a couple of interesting points stand out here. A key one is staff expertise. There are two sides to this; one is the new focus, highlighted in the 2006 Education and Inspections Bill and elsewhere on the sorts of management skills needed to lead change of this potential magnitude. The other is the importance of general staff development, particularly teaching and learning. "Many teachers in schools believe they are teaching BTEC when in fact they are teaching a BTEC syllabus as if it were a GCSE" was one comment. Developing a strong pedagogy will be important but much hangs on how far the Diploma emerges as an applied as opposed to a strictly vocational qualification as to what form of pedagogy is adopted.

The third barrier was management and access. A host of issues arise here including 'planning, timetabling and transport' particularly if a national entitlement is to be secured. The view is of course that no one school would be able to offer everything, rather they would work in collaboration particularly with other local providers yet the picture coming back on collaboration appears patchy. "The majority of 16+ vocational provision provided by schools is delivered independently, not through collaboration." Where there is collaboration, it's largely based on the Increased Flexibility Partnerships but interestingly while these have been very valuable, this Report suggests that they "may have restricted innovation and willingness to try out other partnership models."

The fourth barrier was funding, surprisingly, as this Report indicates, well behind the three already mentioned. The main problem here was that of uncertainty, uncertainty about future funding volumes and uncertainty about just what resources would be needed to sustain Diploma provision. A particular concern was the costing of off site delivery, an issue being tackled with the trialling of different distribution models as proposed in the FE White Paper.

The fifth was communication and understanding, two separate issues but with a common theme, 'how can we plan if we don't know what the things look like?' Stage 2, the working up of the actual qualification, has only just started and will take up the rest of this year and much of next year as well, so as ever synchronicity is an issue. In all fairness, the Government is talking about 3 year pilots for each Diploma wave so this concern may ease. Respondents were also keen for "a huge ad campaign" to promote the Diplomas but of course only so much can be done in advance and expectations need to be 'managed.'

The sixth barrier was that old favourite, employer engagement. Old favourite it may be but these Diplomas are being developed within a very different context with employers given a key role through Diploma Development Partnerships. Some of the concerns about employer commitment may therefore be eased but the sorts of issues raised by respondents suggests that there is still a considerable gulf in how schools and employers perceive each other. Not quite opposite ends of the highway but not always travelling in the same direction either.

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