

POLICY WATCH

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How are the 14 - 19 developments shaping up?

A new year brings the reality of 14 - 19 developments just that bit nearer. The Select Committee currently taking evidence on both specialised Diplomas and adult skills has heard many calls for more time, a call no doubt echoed in staff rooms across the country as the breath of 14 - 19 developments grows ever hotter on the back of the neck.

The pace of change as much as its implementation has increasingly become an issue under this Government. This is being exacerbated this time by the extent of the change being lined up for 2008. So far the Government has shown little inclination for turning, the dates mapped out in the final chapter of the 2005 Implementation Plan remain firmly fixed and it's full speed ahead. The cries from the sharp end are understandable, particularly when lessons from the past are ignored but at least this time there is some lengthy piloting and some shapes are getting a bit clearer. These include the shape of the vision, the shape of the funding, the shape of the quality assurance, the shape of the qualification and perhaps most significantly of all, the shape of the task.

Let's start with the shape of the vision. As expressed in chapter 3 of the 2005 White Paper this initially felt like a familiar rendering of official speak; almost anybody and anything in 14 - 19 learning was to be transformed, strengthened, re engaged, reconfigured, stretched and challenged. Looked at again, the central aim was remarkably prescient. "We aim to transform secondary and post secondary education so that all young people achieve and continue in learning until at least the age of 18." Since then some features have moved up the agenda, notably the emphasis on functional literacies and an increased learning age, and some have dropped off, for example, the general Diploma for the GCSE benchmark.

The vision for 14 - 19 learning is now taking shape and sees the learner sitting at the centre of a range of services and provision, some offered through schools, some through colleges and some through Local Authorities, better supported with advice and guidance on opportunities through the area wide Prospectus. It is the logical extension of the system developed to support Every Child Matters and has now been infused with the personalised learning model laid out in the 2020 Vision Report on Teaching and Learning. Bit by bit other parts of the system are being re arranged to support this vision. The 14 - 19 White Paper, for instance, set out a new role for employers, the Schools White Paper for parents, the Education and Inspections Act for Local Authorities, the FE Bill for LSCs and Vision 2020 for learners. The sound of furniture being re arranged is continuing even as the Government adds other features; trust schools and expansions of the IB and Academy numbers, for instance, were not itemised under the original vision although diversity of outlets was. Collectively, however, we have a radically different model for the provision of learning for young people from even just a few years ago and as such needs to proceed in an orderly manner.

Moving on to the shape of the funding, we now have the nine principles for supporting 14 - 19 provision courtesy of the March 2006 FE White Paper. Fairly standard stuff these include supporting learner choice, enabling collaborative provision, incentivising where possible and being open and transparent. Enthusiasm remains for closing any funding gap, "we want comparable funding for comparable activity undertaken by 16 - 19 year olds" the Minister said last week but 16 - 19 funding is one of those areas that is still cloudy. This is because the Lyons Review has been granted more time to consider some difficult issues about the funding and responsibilities of Local Authorities. One of the questions it is grappling with is the 'implications for Local Authority funding following Leitch.' Lyons is due to report under Budget 2007 in March; until then the issue of whether 16 - 19 funding comes under Local Authorities or the LSC remains open.

For the present some features are clear. Demand led funding is growing and beginning to impact on sixth forms as indicated in the recent important LSC consultation *Delivering World class Skills in a Demand led System*; "negotiating growth as part of a dialogue with the LSC would be a significant change for sixth forms" as para 110 puts it. £70m has been set aside under the DSG for 2007/8 specifically to support work related provision at Key Stage 4 and up to £90m to support the Gateway. Funding for Diplomas for 14 - 16 provision will be part of a wider consultation on school funding due out shortly while the LSC consultation asks for views on funding Diplomas offered across partnerships. A national base rate + weightings + uplifts is proposed. The demise in 'flexibility' funding is worrying many people especially as the actual delivery costs of partnership provision are not easy to establish despite sterling work by LSN..

On quality systems, the specific mechanisms for assuring the quality of Diplomas have yet to be established but a number of principles have. The proxy for this is the New Relationship, a simpler form of planning and accountability being adopted in schools and colleges in various guises. Four features are important here; simpler but more focused forms of national inspection, increased self regulation but counter balanced by controlled intervention by Local Authorities for schools and the LSC for post 16 providers, an increasing use of tendered services based on a quality profile, and specifically for Diplomas, a two stage Gateway process followed by lengthy piloting. The theory is set out in the LSC consultation where it argues that "the new demand led model will act to raise standards as learners and employers, exercising the greater choice they are to be given, increasingly reject poor quality provision." The model is thus Darwinian.

As for the qualifications themselves, the functional skills move into a trialling phase with a Report due to Ministers at the end of March prior to more significant piloting from September 2008. The relationship with GCSEs and adult literacies as well as the nature of the assessment instrument will be teased out during this stage. The Extended Project and the Foundation Learning Tier are also being piloted this year while the phase one Diplomas gradually take shape ready for accreditation in early May. The unit template is already being populated in each case while the grading mechanisms particularly at level 3 are being modelled.

As for the shape of the task, that too is now clearer. A self regulating post 16 sector by 2012, a projected raised learning age by 2013, a 14 - 19 entitlement by 2013, an increased participation rate for 17 year olds by 2015, the four Leitch ambitions by 2020 along with universal personalised learning by the same date. Not planning a holiday in the next decade surely?

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