

POLICY WATCH

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2006/86

LSC Grant and priorities for 2007/8

Like those A levels now being reduced from 6 to 4 assessment modules but without any lessening of their coverage or challenge, so the LSC's Statement of Priorities for the year ahead, released this week, have also gone from 6 to 4 but without any lessening of expectation or demand. It's all about better focusing as the Chief Executive put it in his introduction.

This is the third Annual Statement of Priorities and each one has come at what's said to be a 'critical' stage in learning and skills developments. This year is no different. The Annual Grant Letter from the Secretary of State, released at the same time and spelling out how much money is available for the coming year, £11.3bn, and the key priorities to be met, says as much; " we have reached a critical point in our education and skills agenda."

The LSC has learned to live with 'critical stages,' it goes with the territory, and this year is no different; 14 - 19, FE reform, adult skills, adult learning, balancing funding priorities, internal restructuring, it's a familiar list. Interestingly, though, the Letter refers to the new arrangements for delivering adult skills in London and if there is one 'critical point' that is different, though not surprising, it is the emphasis on sorting out the infrastructure jungle. "It will be important to quickly develop the capacity needed to work in collaboration with partners at local, regional and national level including RDAs, SSCs and Local Authorities." Careful wording but a presumption that Leitch, 14 - 19 et al may force the issue.

Four messages stand out from the Grant letter this year.

Firstly, transition in FE. Nothing new here, it's been in at least the last three Grant Letters; here's Charles Clarke in November 2004, "I look to the Council to press ahead with further reshaping of the FE sector." Look no further, agenda for change is under way, Foster has pronounced and an FE Bill is coming. This year's Letter highlights three current hot spots; "a fully demand led system," "MIAP data collection systems" and "the Framework for Excellence."

Secondly, and now a big driver of 14 - 19 reform, disengaged youngsters. The 2006 Progress Report released by the LSC last week indicated that rather than going down, the NEET numbers were up 1% in 2005 to 11%, against a targeted reduction of 8% by 2010. This area remains a big and continuing challenge. Thirdly, ESOL, where following a review, funding will be much better targeted towards those in need rather than assuming automatic full fee remission, and for recognised qualifications only. Fourthly, the emphasis on full, fat Level 2 remains, "the Council must increase its emphasis on funding full Level 2 qualifications," focusing particularly on employers' priorities

How the LSC intends to tackle these and other 'challenges' over the coming year is set out in the accompanying Annual Statement of Priorities. The theme is 'raising

our game;' a reflection perhaps of Leitch's call a year ago about the need to be more ambitious about raising UK skill levels.

There are four Priorities for 2007/8; the two missing from last year, 'improving the skills of workers delivering public services' and 'strengthening the capacity of the LSC to lead change nationally, regionally and strategically' have been embedded in the others.

Priority 1 focuses on young people and inevitably therefore 14 - 19 developments. Amongst its list of actions for 2007/8, five themes emerge. Firstly participation and that all important 90% participation target by 2015, supported by features such as local area prospectuses, the national roll out of EMAs and expanded provision through 16 - 19 competition policy. Secondly, delivering a broader curriculum built around Diploma programmes; thirdly raising success rates, building on the progress on level 2 attainment and Apprenticeships; fourthly tackling the NEET group, few specific measures here but a high priority, and fifth supporting youngsters with learning difficulties or those in care.

Priority 2 on adult skills recognises the need for a three pronged attack, covering lower, intermediate and high level skills respectively. Again five strong themes supporting this priority with the familiar call to put employers "centre stage" the driving force. Mechanisms here include Train to Gain for which funding will increase next year to £460m, the Level 2 and 3 entitlements and the development of national skills academies. Other themes include supporting the needs of adults, building on the roll out of offender learning and working with SSCs and HEFCE on Sector Skill Agreements and higher level provision respectively.

Priority 3 is about system change and those familiar friends 'choice,' 'responsiveness' and 'quality.' A number of themes are stressed here, some to do with buildings, "we have already committed over £4bn of building projects renewing over 50% of the college estate," some with planning, light touch, greater competition, more rewards, and some with trying to create a competitive market place. The main vehicle for reform here is 'agenda for change,' now in its second year and where further activity on funding, the communications gateway, simplified data collection and learner accounts are all signalled for next year.

Priority 4 is all about working with partners to support economic development. Amongst the jostle of bodies and activity here, the focus is on developing regional commissioning plans, supporting "the energising of market towns through local area agreements, working with Jobcentre Plus to support low skilled adults who are not working and working with Regional Skills Partnerships and city strategies.

Last year's Priorities incorporated 49 'key tasks,' the year before 21. This year's Annual Statement of Priorities lists just over a hundred "key actions for 2007/8." It doesn't get any easier.

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