

POLICY WATCH

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Two Reports look at 14 - 19 partnership preparedness

With launch year for the Phase 1 Diploma pilot looming, how prepared are the first 14 - 19 pathfinders? Two Reports, just released, have been assessing the situation.

"Our conclusion," says one, an Issues Paper from the Nuffield Review of 14 - 19 education and training, "is that there is still some way to go and that there are still some significant obstacles in the way." A particular obstacle being conflicting Government policy, urging institutions to collaborate on the one hand while competing for pupils, funding and resources on the other. As for the other Report, a comprehensive survey of the progress of 14 - 19 partnerships across 150 Local Authorities by the National Audit Office (NAO), 'many local areas are responding impressively but less well developed areas still have much to do to provide the entitlement by 2013.' Amongst that 'much to do,' significantly, is employer engagement, the key driving force behind much of the 14 - 19 reform programme but considered weak in "over two thirds of partnerships."

So almost two years to the day since the 14 - 19 Implementation Plan, with its 18 pages of 'to do' lists, was published, there remains not just much to do but seemingly much to square as well. A major frustration seems to be that so much of this reform programme is dependent on variables over which providers have such little control - Government policy, future funding, acceptance by HE and so on.

The success of the 14 - 19 reform programme will be judged against many variables but arguably six central 'tests' stand out. Can it: raise levels of functional skills, establish a defined position in the qualification framework, engage learners, secure stakeholder buy in, gain the support of the teaching workforce and become a central feature in a new collaborative system? Effective collaboration is thus one of the likely success measure for 14 - 19 reform and both Nuffield and the NAO have adopted their own six 'tests' for assessing how well it's progressing.

The six dimensions, as the Nuffield Paper call them, are set within a template that characterise a 'strongly collaborative partnership' as opposed to a 'weakly collaborative' one. Like the Gateway criteria, these dimensions constitute a scale against which 14 - 19 partnerships can measure their progress as they move from weakly to strongly collaborative. The six cover: overall vision, local structures, pedagogy and professional development, the physical learning environment, the curriculum and assessment offer and an accountability framework.

The Paper concludes that some progress has been made against the first four but less against the last two; the curriculum offer and accountability. Significantly these are both areas over which consortia have limited influence. It calls for local area target setting and shared quality assurance to encourage collaboration.

The NAO Report is based on surveys, visits, interviews and case studies completed largely before July this year. On the basis of this pretty extensive research it



identifies "six main areas of risk that need to be managed for successful local implementation of the 14 - 19 reforms."

The **first** is 'commitment to the reforms from all key stakeholders,' an important prerequisite but something that takes time and often enterprising local leadership, "we found that the most successful partnerships were those led by respected individuals from the top tiers of management." Previous working together, perhaps under the Increased Flexibility scheme often helped with issues of trust but the big concern here is product uncertainty; "it was clear from our focus groups that the most important questions are: what are Diplomas worth and what will they lead to?" It's on questions like these that stakeholder commitment appears to hang.

The **second** is 'partnerships established and operating,' Nuffield's strongly collaborative model. 75% of the consortia have been in existence for at least two years and the Dept has allocated an average £100,000 pa to Authorities to help with capacity building but the Report identifies a number of barriers to 'effective collaboration.' These include: uncertainty over future funding, lack of employer engagement, protective capacity (looking after one's own first,) competitive behaviour, complexities of strategic planning in areas like transport and timetabling. The first two, future funding levels and lack of employer engagement, appear as the biggest barriers currently, "our results indicated that only a quarter of consortia are so far coordinating engagement with employers," yet, perversely, college and training provider expertise in this area remains untapped.

The **third** is 'full involvement of all partners.' The worry here is that if some secondary schools opt out of offering Diplomas that a sheep and goats mentality will harden across the sector. NAO take a strong line here arguing that 'sanctions should be used for those unwilling to collaborate,' a move that goes beyond the duty to ensure collaboration enshrined in the 2006 Education Act. This is another area where Government policy, in this case encouraging choice and presumption, is creating tensions with the push to collaborate.

The **fourth** is 'confidence in the processes and products at a local level.' A big problem here is building a system when there are so many unknowns including take up. 39,000 places were approved under Gateway 1 for Sept 2008 starts with a similar figure for 09 starts and the Dept is forecasting that around 800,000 14 - 19 year olds could be studying for Diplomas by 2013 but the Report believes these figures "should be treated with caution." Unsurprisingly, the NAO find wariness at a local level about long term planning and forecasting.

The **fifth** is 'good communication of progress and lessons learned.' The Diploma, let alone the whole 14 - 19 reform programme, is not an easy beast to explain and despite the phased and targeted communication strategy, the deployment of champions and the other communication strategies, the Report finds levels of awareness and understanding limited. Functional skills seems to pose a particular issue, "we found they were not well understood," which given the importance attached to these skills nationally, highlights the extent of the problem.

And the **sixth** perhaps inevitably is 'clear funding arrangements and coherence of funding for capital projects.' Costing the delivery of the Diploma is one issue but it seems that recognition of the additional costs in collaborative structures remains "the most frequently cited matter of concern at a local level."

The Dept claims to have met its 'key milestones' but is everyone on board yet?

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