

Bitesize Briefing Raising Expectations White Paper (March 2008)

Below is the text of an Edexcel Policy Briefing:

So nine years after plans were first unfurled for a new post - 16 system to be built around the Learning and Skills Council, a new system is drafted for learning and skills in this country but without the LSC. '*Learning to Succeed*' as the White Paper was called in 1999 has become in 2008 '*Raising Expectations*.' It's goodbye LSC, although not until 2010, and hello to a smattering of new bodies and systems. The aim, as the Paper points out, is about '*hiding the wiring*' and '*creating clear pathways for customers*.'

It's not that the LSC has done badly, after all "*it has delivered year on year on improvements in participation and success rates*," it's just that the world has moved on. Then we had the Further Education Funding Council, National Training Organisations, infant RDAs and old, in the sense of pre - Labour, TECs; "*the system lacks clarity, co - ordination and coherence*" David Blunkett told the House of Commons on 30 June 1999. Some of the problems have remained the same; social exclusion, 16 - 19 reform, basic skills concerns, global pressures on adult skill levels, but we have a different set of instruments and expectations now, covering 14 - 19 reform, Leitch, commissioned provision, demand - led funding and sector skill strategies. The world certainly feels a different place from when the Learning and Skills Council took its first tentative steps into the spotlight and David Blunkett welcomed it as "*the most significant and far - reaching reform ever enacted in post - 16 learning in this country*." The burden of aspiration, let alone the hyperbole that goes with it, now rests on not one but two pairs of shoulders, principally Local Authorities for pre - 19 provision and a new Skills Funding Agency for post - 19 provision - and perhaps even three, if we add in the Higher Level Skills Strategy due out shortly.

The trigger for this latest round of changes was last summer's Sub - National Review and Machinery of Government changes and specifically the intention to transfer the £7bn of funding for 16 - 19 provision from the LSC to Local Authorities. The hole this created may have precipitated the changes but in truth two separate systems, one for 14 - 19 provision and one for adult skills have been emerging for some time. Distinct policy drivers sit behind each as the November 2007 Machinery of Government letter identified: an extension of the participation age for young people, a common 14 - 19 funding system, a new qualification offer, commissioned provision and a long - term Children's Plan driving 14 - 19 reform. Leitch targets, an upskilling agenda with public sign - up through a Skills Pledge, growing integration between employment and skills and the re - routing of funding through demand - led systems such as Train to Gain and Skills Accounts, providing the momentum for adult skills.

The twin policy objectives in this White Paper reflect the two emerging systems. Pre - 19, it's about giving "*Local Authorities the necessary funding and commissioning powers to effectively deliver the new entitlements and raise the participation age*." For adult learning, it's about "*streamlining the post - 19 skills*

system, creating a demand - led system, integrating employment and skills” and thereby making faster progress towards the 2020 skills targets.

This Paper sets out a new infrastructure to support each objective. It is a Paper obsessed with structures and systems, three of the most commonly used words are ‘strong,’ ‘effective’ and ‘systems’ and generally in that order. Not all the bits mesh and some of the working arrangements remain to be teased out but it is a Consultation Paper and as such remains open for comment until 9th June 2008. There is an interesting difference between the two systems. Pre - 19 “institutional stability” is important; post - 19, it isn’t. Commissioning at 14 - 19 means managing choice, commissioning at post - 19 means managing “the trading conditions.”

At 16 - 19, the key player is the Local Authority, supported in varying degrees by a new “slimline” Young People’s Learning Agency, potentially perhaps a stalking horse for a 14 - 19 funding agency, RDAs and Government Offices to provide the wider context, and 14 - 19 partnerships as the local planning and steering group. In essence, Local Authorities will be charged with planning and funding 14 - 19 provision, ensuring that the entitlement is available for every young person and that funding follows the learner. They will start by drawing up a local commissioning plan, based on intelligence from local 14 - 19 partnerships and any other demand mechanisms, and incorporated as part of their Children and Young People’s Plan. This Plan will be critical as it will provide the basis for commissioning or de - commissioning provision and for allocating funding to follow.

The emphasis is on local responsibility and accountability but there are some twists here. For a start, local commissioning plans need to be shared with other LAs in ‘sub - regional groupings’ to ensure provision is coherent and aggregated. Plans may also need to be ‘squared’ at a Regional Planning Forum with RDAs and the local Government Office, while the Young People’s Learning Agency “*will perform a final moderation of the commissioning plans to ensure they fit within overall budget and that the new entitlement is being delivered.*” Although providers will only have to face one strategic commissioning dialogue with one Local Authority, it does, on paper at least, feel heavy. The Paper seems to recognise the dangers, “*the interaction between commissioner and provider must not be so complex that it draws energy from the task of educating and training young people.*”

Post - 19, there are a number of key new players including the Commission for Employment and Skills which kicks off formally next month, and, in some cases, local Employment and Skills Boards but principally a new Skills Funding Agency (SFA,) filling the gap to be vacated by the LSC and described as “*a focused, streamlined agency, close to Government and with an operational role.*”

The difficulty at present is in unpacking the role of the SFA; it comes described as a funding not a planning body but subsequent paragraphs give it at least half a dozen roles bordering on planning. These include managing the framework and the development of the FE service including its performance, setting the trading conditions for the provider market - place, managing the three formal arms of the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS,) the National Employer Service (NES) and the new Advancement and Careers Service, Offender Learning and the growing integration with Jobcentre Plus. It’s one of those places in the Paper where the wiring seems dangerously near to getting tangled.