

Overview of Skills for Life strategic influence on activity in the West Midlands

(An input into Staffordshire University's July 2006 seminar)

1. National Skills for Life Strategy

- (a) The first five years of developments, as a result of implementing the government adult basic skills strategy has left a legacy of lots of 'stuff'. Much of it has proved to be very useful stuff (a set of coherent, agreed standards; lists of skills at different levels captured in curricula; diagnostic assessment of each learner's unique spiky profile to identify work to be focused on; the emphasis on 'moving on' rather than repeated attendance; etc). At the same time there have been some activities that may have been less useful (endless customisation, of quite simple things, to a range of settings – to the extent that the original simplicity is lost in the plethora of versions).
- (b) Early on in the strategy it was clear from Chief Inspectors reports that adult basic skills provision was weak when compared with other curriculum areas. There was an emphasis on Skills for Life catching up with 'fe'. What has really been seen, over recent years, is Skills for Life leading the way in many developments. There is now less need for a discrete Skills for Life focus. It can be treated as part of 'fe' (it is now strong enough to hold its own, with the engagement of senior managers, within whole organisation development planning).
- (c) The DfES Skills for Life Unit has similarly moved towards a more 'distributed' policy, looking for example at ensuring full Level 2/Level 3 progress underpinned by real functional skills. There is a recognition of the need for Skills for Life in ensuring outcomes of other strategies (Neighbourhood Renewal; health; social cohesion ...).
- (d) Roles are clearly shifting at the moment: The DfES provides strategic direction to its partners; the Learning and Skills Council has a responsibility to plan and fund delivery through good providers; the new Quality Improvement Agency and the Inspectorate support and challenge; taking a light touch approach with competent organisations; provider organisations are expected to deliver a modernised public service, offering choice, flexibility and quality etc.
- (e) In a recent declaration the government announced a new aspiration, that by 2020 there would be a virtual elimination of low levels of literacy ... (... and numeracy?). Having halved the problem by 2010, the strategy is to go beyond that and finish the job. This may mean different approaches but is a laudable aspiration. Does it mean, then, that any of us still around in 2020 will be celebrating 'job done' – the end of any need for discrete literacy, language and numeracy provision (because any small residual needs can be met by fewer specialists supporting functional skills improvement across all forms of learning)?

2. Standards and Curricula (part of the 'good stuff' referred to earlier)

- (a) These are due for some minor revision ... much of this is due by 2007; and links to the development of functional skills (Sept 06 = small scale trials; Sept 07 piloting; Sept 09 = fully available nationally). The current adult standards are written large in these developments, which will ultimately provide the same underpinning function basis for learning, 11 to adult.
- (b) There is a need for a fairly rapid set of clarifications. There are differences of interpretation: e.g. '... mapped to the standards ...' (not mapped to curriculum; not endless reference numbers on every document). The skills curriculum is there to be actively used to check that skills being covered – but is that really done efficiently and effectively at the moment? There is a similar need for clarification re the various 'myths and legends' that have become part of professional belief systems in some organisations (e.g. 'Entry 1/Entry 2 provision is not fundable'; 'The LSC are not interested in funding activity that doesn't directly add to targets' ...). These are clearly wrong but are still being repeated between professionals.
- (c) Have we ended up, for all good reasons, being too standardised? (Do people too easily get placed into ESOL? How easy is it to do mixed skills learning using integrated materials, based on real-life needs? Are we at a time for loosening up on what we do whilst at same time tightening up upon thinking about that practice?)

3. Teacher training and development

- (a) There is a need for clarity about the roles we expect staff to play. Training and development links to these functional roles not titles (volunteer, teacher/tutor/lecturer etc). There are 3 roles with 3 quite different functions which need 3 different sets of development.
- (b) The standards for Initial Teacher Training are being revised to make them 'fit for new fe'. There is a focus on pre-service training and how this can best be done. There is a short-time opportunity (between Sept 06 and July 07) for existing teachers to have skills recognition through a validated 'portfolio process', to give 'approved status'.
- (c) The models being looked at, for continuing professional development, move away from required attendance; put emphasis on identifying skills and competences that can be demonstrated in workplace, and there being opportunities for the accreditation of that 'practical reflection'; leading (via electronic passports ...?) to alternative routes to qualification. Specialist staff information, advice and guidance is a key in all of this, to ensure that the staff of each organisation get the best advice about which routes are best etc.

4. Quality Improvement

- (a) The Quality Improvement Agency are currently tendering for the new Skills for Life Quality Improvement Programme (Sept 06– July 07)

initially ...). This has a number of strands that are in line with the next step developments identified in this region.

- (b) The emphasis is clearly on each organisation taking responsibility for its capacity for self assessment; leading to it making intelligent choices (where not being involved in everything can be good) and drawing selectively on menus of support. There is an increased emphasis on sharing insights across, between networks of organisations (cf. centrally-driven 'reporting up').

5. Targets and aspirations

- (a) Clearly the money put in by the Treasury is seen as being for a set of outcomes. Progress towards these are tracked as milestones to the 2010 public service agreement target. Regionally this area is expected to contribute 256,000 'successes' over 10 years. In 2005, we are halfway there and are clearly in front of projection. We can relax a bit about reaching target numbers, but keep an eye on improving the basic skills of ever more people. In one way the next half of the period to 2010 is about getting to the 'hard to reach', but in another way many of the people are already in the system (it's just that we need to improve their basic skills as part of other activities).
- (b) There are 3 aspects to consider when thinking about the national targets:
 - 1. securing issue (we still need to ensure that national expectations of us will be met)
 - 2. equity issue (who gets there; who doesn't)
 - 3. curriculum management issue (we need not simply to hit the target by all sorts of 'artificial' devices – but to sail past the target by making real differences to real people's skills levels.
- (c) So the thinking needs to be partly about securing targets, but always needs to go beyond this. The strategy, nationally, was always about making large scale inroads into social needs. The focus now is on:
 - people in work/people seeking to get into work (probably with Entry 3/Level 1 being key to this)
 - people at risk (e.g. work with offenders – so that higher skills levels supports countering reoffending)
 - giving some sections of society better skills in order to support social cohesion/citizenship/engagement (and Entry 1/Entry 2 probably being more important for this)
 - work in disadvantaged communities, closing the skills gaps:
 - for urban poor
 - for rural poorwith an understanding of the levels of need, the target neighbourhoods etc for them.
 - ensuring that our provision is recognisably a modernised public service
 - flexibility (i.e. some fast-track, intensive; some embedded ...)/responsiveness (to range of needs)
 - customisation (to different sectors; to Jobcentre Plus customers etc)/responsiveness (in place, timings etc)

- new ways of organising ourselves to deliver, and remodelling of workforce
- personalisation/assessment for learning (including clear feedback; clear indication of how to improve etc)

6. So, in conclusion, as a summary I would say that it's all about high quality teaching, effective learning and modernised organisational support (in the changing context of strategy implementation) in order to secure long term social change.