

Professional development of the basic skills teaching workforce – whose responsibility?

Organisations have always held responsibility for the continuing professional development of their workforce. At times of stability this is often driven by individual needs of staff and by specific organisational needs. At times of rapid change associated with the determined implementation of national strategies (Skills for Life/21st Century Skills etc) the driving momentum can shift to external forces. These can include national initiative expectations, local Learning and Skills Council expectations, regional development/regeneration zone expectations etc. The danger is that the support mechanisms put in place to assist organisations make effective progress in time of change can themselves become sources of dependency or can undermine organisations' own responsibilities.

A chain of Skills for Life dependencies might arise through:

- staff of organisations phoning professional development centres to find out about curriculum training 'because my line manager didn't seem to know what I should be doing'
- organisations ceasing to draw up well-based staff development plans re Skills for life teaching and learning 'because the LSC will come up with a list of things we have to do'
- local LSCs send messages to providers about needing to plan within a coherent framework but can't tell providers clearly what this is 'because we're waiting for 'national' to tell us what can be done'
- local professional development networks being unsure of their own next steps 'because we don't know what might be coming next, from the national strategy'

We are moving into clearer situations in many ways. The framework of the national skills strategy is in place; delegations to regional skills partnerships are clarifying; there is a sense that things are locking into place.

With the Skills for Life strategy having moved from 'development', through 'national implementation' (now being completed) to a 'local embedding' phase – and with Skills for Life becoming a key thread within the wider 21st Century Skills Strategy – the balance is shifting back towards the responsibilities of provider organisations within wider frameworks of challenge and support.

By 2006-7 the focus is likely to be much more on organisations having whole organisation approaches to Skills for Life cpd/quality/qualifications etc (in the context of their wider planned developments across all their learning and skills portfolio of provision). The emphasis could helpfully be on self assessment against a framework of expectations with external interventions being in inverse proportion to success – light touch with some organisations whilst other organisations are subject to a greater degree of challenges with an appropriate amount of support. Organisations are likely to be more accountable for outcomes whilst having more freedoms and flexibilities as to how these outcomes are met (having due regard to standards of service etc).

This implies:

- less centrally prescribed programmes – more of a menu of activity that organisations draw on, mixing and matching with their own activity
- mechanisms to ‘share across’ rather than ‘report up’
- more attention to the quality of planning processes than to the detail of plans
- bringing different activities together to address common objectives/wider targets
- attention to ‘functions’ (getting there, distance to travel, jobs to be done) rather than ‘structures’ – with faster responses, being more fleet of foot
- shifting the status of cpd activities (and associated networks/centres) from being seen as an ‘initiative’ to ‘as needed’
- prioritising money onto changes to be made

Any decisions about regional or pan-area ways forward will need to be taken in light of the above. There are a variety of approaches to choose from:

Strong central structures where time, energy and resources go into sustaining the structures; ‘light’ enabling structures that support those things that organisations are not able to do themselves (because of scale; because of risk etc); mechanisms to ensure that intelligence is shared across networks; processes for challenging organisations to do more, and identifying the support/resources enable this etc ...

The models chosen, if fit for purposes over the next 3-5 years, will probably:

- avoid creating increased dependencies, and will lessen current dependencies within a robust framework of quality/standards/strategy implementation
- refocus onus more onto provider organisations’ (and intermediary organisations’) own responsibilities and accountabilities, with differentiated levels of support and challenge
- put emphasis on ‘getting there’ (beyond fragmentary activity; beyond going through processes) faster/deeper/wider than organisations would be able to do on their own – focusing on the distance still to travel.