

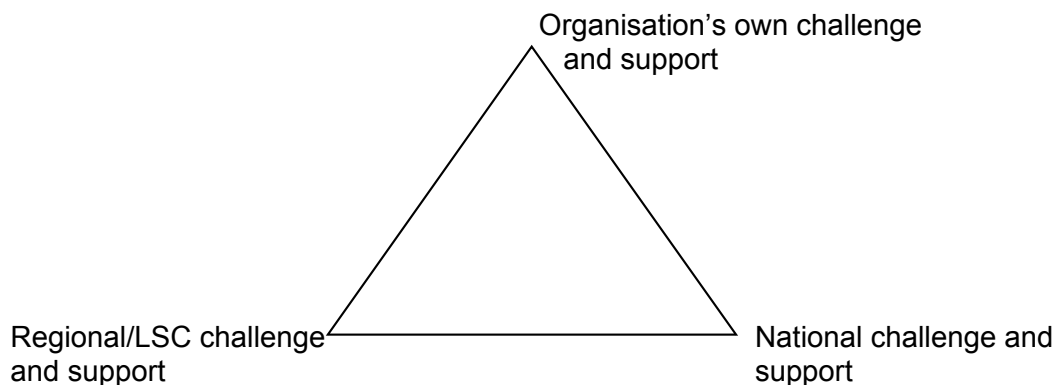
A regional approach to professional development and quality improvement

As someone who enjoys puzzles it would only be natural to spend some of my time thinking about what would be distinctive or valuable about a regional approach to continuing professional development and pre-service training. If we were aiming for one how would we know when we had got there? What thinking tools can help us on the way? What do we know already and what needs to be thought through at a deeper level?

- Each organisation funded by the Learning and Skills Council carries an expectation that it will be planning for staff development as part of any development planning, in the context of national reports which lay out the anticipation of a modernised further education service.
- Skills for Life is a strategic priority at the moment. The national strategy was formulated in its first (1999-2001) phase and effectively driven out nationally in its second phase (2001-2004). The 2004-2007 next phase will essentially be about making sense of it all locally - joining all the 'bits' of the strategy together in whole organisation/whole are coherence. A useful phrase from the 70s that fits well here is 'beyond the fragments' By the 2007-2010 phase we might expect that Skills for Life still needs an important focus but as only one key thread in a wider set of skills developments.
- In many areas there are now a range of basic skills networks; Skills for Life fora; professional development networks; professional development centres etc etc. Alongside these sit national development projects that have a 'delivered in the region' tag line – often bringing a different set of steering groups; management meetings etc. The familiar picture of various combinations of people meeting around different, overlapping agendas highlights a need for stock-take and reshaping to make the 'old' processes (set up to 'distribute' the strategy) fit for the 'new' purposes (increased local coherence; reduction of time away from delivery etc)
- A lot of work has been done to get Level 4, Level 3, Level 2 qualifications in place and to get courses up and running to delivery larger numbers of these qualifications. Alongside this, in the West Midlands and elsewhere, work has been done to calculate back from regional/local Skills for Life targets and patterns of provision to demonstrate the number and kind of qualified staffing that might be needed over the next three years. This means that, as a region, we are getting better placed to have a rational basis for how many Level 4 places, in which subjects, are needed in different parts of the region.
- The 'offer' now needs to tip away from any tendency to aid older 'adult learning mode' (e.g. we put on lots of level 2 courses, then try to fill them, then blame organisations that don't turn up) to a tendency towards a 'demand-led mode' i.e. commissioning a finite programme to complete a distinct set of real needs with specific staff in targeted organisations. The same logic will apply to facilitation i.e. which organisations need what kinds of whole organisation facilitation, and who is best placed to do this?

- Some of the processes developed as part of getting a consistent infrastructure in place, were designed at one step away from the day to day reality of their application. Intermediaries then layered their own interpretations on top of the initial expectations and the whole set of processes, in some cases, can easily then become unmanageable. 'Leadership and management' and 'whole organisation' work underway can help clarify those situations where minimum requirements are not being met and those situations where organisations are overcomplicating things.
- Models that assume attendance away from teaching time; assume steering groups; assume coordinators/development workers etc, (without an analysis of why these are the best model), are causing too many drains on the system. Within organisational processes there is the danger of too much time being spent on internal activity and too little time on guaranteeing stated outcomes. Organisations most 'at risk' of not delivering are often ones with least capacity to release staff to take up training; to deliver training or to be involved in management groups. New options need to be explored (which might include subject coaches; 'management by email'; e-updating; e-learning etc).
- Work is underway to look at accreditation of prior learning/achievement across the various professional development opportunities in the region, not to establish a West Midlands Framework outside of national developments but to push the APL 'idea' faster, deeper, wider than it is currently going and to try it out to see where it stands up and where it falls over. Some time ago we produced a 'route map' to help people understand the combinations of pathways and options. There is more to be done to counter even quite simple misunderstandings and to find ways of staff seeing the choices available.
- As a region we have been substantially involved in helping to develop and trial the Level 2 supporter role and its accompanying qualification. This has taken off with providers delivering Level 2 courses via City and Guilds accreditation and places being taken up by adult supporters within a range of preschool, Probation Service, Jobcentre Plus, college, adult education, work-based training organisations, voluntary and community groups etc. The time must now be right to ask 'How many adult supporters are still needed? How much more 'awareness' does there need to be? And to tailor a programme to meet finite priority needs.
- The calculations on future workforce needs are highlighting the gaps around diversity of the workforce; shortage of numeracy teachers; need for people able to engage with the new ways of working across a range of client groups. There is still a great deal of cloudiness and misinformation within the system around what qualifications are needed, by whom, for what purposes, by what date..... One result of this, when coupled with provider organisations seeking well qualified and well experienced staff is that new recruits are finding it very difficult to enter the workforce. Part of the energy over the next year has to go on ensuring that a menu of stepping stones are easily available to get these potential recruits over the pre-service to in-service barriers.

- Things are still changing in the Skills for Life world, but not as quickly as in the 2001-4 dissemination phase. Much of the information is out there – Many of the tools are available. There is work to be done, from the regional perspective to identify all those things that are still on their own way down national ‘pipelines’ to look at the excellent practice on the ground and to make best sense of it all i.e. taking on a strong interpreter/translator function for a while. Additional activity generated within the region can then be alongside national development (adding strength to them, pushing them further, or making them more useful in practice); can ‘harvest’ knowledge/practice from across a broader set of agencies and make sure that this gets everywhere; can commission specific developments to take things further forward – all without adding to the burden of bureaucracy, more meetings, unnecessary complexity etc
- Any arguing for a regional approach need not be at the expense of supporting a strong national framework re expectations and outcomes (... or what’s a strategy for?). Recognising the strength of the Skills for Life strategy, and the gains it has brought so far, means that regions can identify the disparity between regions and within the region. This starts to generate the development emphases for that region and starts to create a ‘demand-led’ agenda for professional development of Skills for Life strategies and the development intentions of the Regional Skills Partnership but should provide headline intentions for where the region as a whole needs to be by 2007 and by 2010.
- Some of this work will best be done nationally; some best done regionally/via local Learning and Skills Councils; and some rightly stressed as an organisation’s own responsibility. Rather than seeing these as separate boxes, it is more a case of ensuring that activity at one level challenges and supports activity at other levels. Different developments need to be seen as interacting around a much clearer set of distinct functions whereas at the moment responsibilities and overlaps are somewhat cloudy. Rather than a hierarchy, a better diagram would be a triangle.



- Local organisations are operating on 3 year development plans; LSC developments locally and regionally are increasingly structured around three year periods (e.g. 2004-7). National activity appears to be on a shorter

planning base with uncertainty, each year, about what is coming next, with what level of support etc until well into the year. There needs to be a clear 3 year set of national expectations agreed so that regional planning can be done sensibly to take us through to the 2007/8 period (i.e. looking towards the outcome settings described in the DfES Five Year Plan), including a description of any pick up of existing activity by the National Quality Improvement Body.

- At the moment we are looking at the range of professional development activity flowing within, and across, the region and identifying (post April 2005) those elements that are best continued nationally, those that are best done regionally, those that are a local LSC function, and those that are properly the responsibility of separate provider organisations.

The 'thinking' points' above have brought the West Midlands from a standing start (in 2001) to a network of professional development support (in 2003) and a 'whole-region' approach that will move us on (to 2007).