

ISSUES PAPER 2

14-19 Partnerships:

From Weakly Collaborative Arrangement to Strongly Collaborative Local Learning Systems

November 2007

Introduction

Following its three Annual Reports in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training is producing *Issues Papers* which focus upon specific areas of concern, with a view to widening the debate, testing out tentative conclusions and seeking further evidence.

This *Issues Paper* examines emerging forms of 14-19 partnership development in England and considers the question, *'What are the main dimensions of a system of governance and organisation required to support inclusive, effective and future-orientated learning for all 14-19 year-olds?'*

The Government argues that its 14-19 reforms, and particularly the delivery of the Diplomas, can only be achieved through imaginative and well-led collaboration

between schools, colleges and providers of work-based learning. There are already some examples of partnership working, however, what is now envisaged, is of a different order. As the title of this paper suggests, a decisive move is required from 'weakly collaborative partnerships' to 'strongly collaborative local learning systems'.

In this paper we look at recent developments in 14-19 partnerships to see whether they are making this transition. Our conclusion is that there is some way to go and that there are still significant obstacles in the way. A particular difficulty is that the Government urges institutions to collaborate while, at the same time, encouraging them to compete for pupils, funding and resources in the pursuit of school improvement.

Partnership working is also an important feature of Welsh Assembly Government policy on 14-19 education and training in Wales. A future paper will compare 14-19 developments in Wales and England to explore how issues common to the two countries are being addressed.

Background and policy context

Institutional collaboration in the provision of learning opportunities for 14-19 year olds is not a new phenomenon. Examples of shared provision in minority post-16 subjects between small school sixth forms have existed for many years. However, what is now required is a step change for 14-19 reform involving a wider range of partners.

From the mid-1990s, government programmes began to encourage collaboration between schools and colleges in the provision of work-related learning opportunities for 14-16 year-olds as part of a more flexible Key Stage 4 curriculum, aimed at motivating those disaffected by traditional courses and classroom learning. However, these programmes affected limited groups of learners and small numbers of institutions, typically in bilateral arrangements. Since 2002¹, the Government has placed a much greater emphasis on local collaborative partnerships involving a range of stakeholders as a critical element in the provision of 14-19 education and, in particular, practical and applied learning opportunities.

In 2005, the Government set revised targets for increased participation and attainment among young people, which aimed to bridge the gap with international competitors on education and training performance². Two years later, it proposed to raise the 'education participation age' to 18 years by 2015³. Both policies drive local collaboration to enhance provision and to secure progression routes for larger numbers of young people.

As part of its strategy for meeting its targets, the Government is putting in place a national '14-19 Entitlement', according to which young people should be given the opportunity to take any of the 14-19 Diploma lines by 2013. Local Authorities and the Learning and Skills Council have been charged with ensuring that the full Entitlement is available to all young people in their area and the former have a duty to publish a prospectus setting out the range of opportunities on offer. To achieve this remit, they will need to encourage and support collaborative arrangements between local education and training providers and other partners such as employers, voluntary and community organisations, careers advisers and youth services. The Government has made it clear that it does not expect any single school or college to be able to meet the Entitlement on its own: it envisages collaboration between institutions ensuring that the full range of provision is available in a local area.

¹DfES (2002) 14-19: *Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards*. London: DfES.

²DfES (2005) 14-19 *Education and Skills*. London: DfES.
³DfES (2007) *Raising Expectations: Staying in education and training post-16*. London: DfES.

Weakly collaborative 14-19 arrangements

In 2006, the Review noted an increasing number of collaborative 14–19 initiatives. Most, however, by falling short of becoming fully inclusive local learning systems, risked being inefficient and inequitable.

The 2006 Nuffield Review Annual Report cited evidence from 14-19 Pathfinder evaluation studies and surveys⁴, showing that collaborative arrangements were expanding. Impetus had come from several initiatives, including the Increased Flexibility Programme, the 14-19 Implementation Plan, Area-Wide Inspections and Strategic Area Reviews, as well as specific interventions by organisations such as the Learning and Skills Network, which has undertaken focused work to raise the quality of vocational learning and partnership development. In this context, consortia of various types introduced more vocational or applied provision, attempted to assess future learning needs, considered progression routes for learners, prepared local prospectuses and Entitlements, and began to set up partnership infrastructure.

Despite this progress, the Nuffield Review Annual Report (2006) characterised 14-19 partnership arrangements in England as ‘weakly collaborative’. The main factors inhibiting the development of stronger partnerships were considered to be:

- the predominant influence of competition and selection as drivers of institutional provision and attitudes, particularly in schools;
- the restriction of collaborative arrangements to relatively small groups of learners (notably the ‘disaffected’), and to the more vocational areas of the curriculum (with the exception of some ‘minority’ A Level subjects);
- a lack of commitment by parents and governors, who are often not involved in or consulted about the arrangements;
- uncertainties arising from a dependence on external (and often short-term) funding;
- the limited staff resources available for partnership working;
- lack of clarity over local leadership, and
- fragility because of a reliance on committed individuals (particularly heads and principals) whose work might disappear if they move to another area.

Moreover, weakly collaborative arrangements may remain inequitable and inefficient. For example, even in some of the most innovative partnerships, students at Entry Level have far fewer learning choices than those at Advanced Level.

⁴These include: Higham, J. and Yeomans, D. (2006) Emerging provision and practice in 14-19 education and training: a report on the evaluation of the third year of the 14-19 Pathfinder Initiative. DfES Research Report 737. Nottingham: DfES; Tirrell, J., Winter, A.M. and Hawthorn, S. (2006) Challenges facing partnerships: current developments towards implementation of 14-19 reform in local authorities. Sheffield: LEACAN 14+ Ltd.

There is also little evidence, to date, that existing partnerships can deliver decisive efficiency gains because the improved viability of minority courses is offset by student travel costs between institutions. The Nuffield Review argues that policy that increases competition between institutions reduces choice of provision for students, as

schools continue to scramble for the most able young people, even if it mean running inefficient courses at Advanced Level.⁵

The main dimensions of weakly collaborative partnerships are illustrated in Figure 1 and contrasted with a model of strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems⁶.

Figure 1. Dimensions of weakly and strongly collaborative 14-19 learning systems

Dimensions/Local Actions	Weakly Collaborative	Strongly Collaborative
<p>1. <i>Vision, purposes and underpinning principles</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision statements for the curriculum and for 14-19 partnership • Learner entitlement statements 	<p>Vision statements and learner entitlements largely confined to the government agenda of providing ‘alternative’ learning experiences.</p>	<p>Vision statements and learner entitlements cover all aspects of 14-19 learning, including GCSEs and A Levels, and attempt to take a more unified and integrated approach to learning.</p>
<p>2. <i>Curriculum, qualifications and assessment</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping provision • Building progression routes • Deciding on a Diploma offer • Strengthening vocational provision 	<p>Development of vocational pathways and programmes from 14+ for some learners. A primary goal is motivating disaffected 14-16 year-olds, using college and work-based provision.</p>	<p>Developing holistic programmes across all types of learning with a focus on more flexible, applied and practical approaches for all learners from 14+.</p>
<p>3. <i>Planning, funding, organisation and governance in a ‘local area’</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Authorities (LAs), Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) and Connexions working together to deliver the Entitlement • Forming partnerships and clusters 	<p>Confused or contested relationships between LAs, LLSCs (Local LSCs) and providers, with lack of clarity about local leadership. Partnerships and clusters are under-developed, dependent on external funding and easily destabilised (e.g. by</p>	<p>Clear and accepted local governance arrangements with a high degree of collaboration between LAs, LLSCs, local providers and wider partners (e.g. Connexions, employers, voluntary and community organisations), thus</p>

⁵See Stanton. G. (2006) Equity issues: do we need a post-16 admissions code? London Plus - 14-19 quality and improvement conference “Raising the bar for London’s learners” Monday, 5 February 2007 (<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/schools/leid/post14/events/GS11Nov.pdf>)

⁶A strongly collaborative system is an aspirational model developed from ideas and practices advocated in the Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004) and evidence from practitioners, policy makers and researchers gathered as part of the Nuffield Review.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing local prospectuses • Making decisions about funding collaborative learning opportunities 	<p>institutional competition or changes in key personnel).</p>	<p>increasing governance capacity and leadership. Capacity to consider post-16 institutional rationalisation to boost the range and efficiency of provision.</p>
<p>4. <i>Professionalism, pedagogy and leadership</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14-19 Pathfinders • Learning Visits • Development networks and joint Continuing Professional Development (CPD) 	<p>Conformity to government reform agenda without a strong professionally informed sense of what is required at the local level. Limited leadership and CPD, with a dependence on nationally generated support and key local individuals.</p>	<p>Strong sense of local professionalism, leadership and a shared knowledge of the area; a more reflective, longer-term, planned and locally generated approach to capacity building using pooled local and national funding and locally agreed tariffs for learner programmes.</p>
<p>5. <i>Physical learning environments and communications systems</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building new skills centres • Building Schools for the Future • Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure • Pooling funding for shared resources or specialisms 	<p>New infrastructure arrangements are driven by institutional self-interest and incentivised by national funding (e.g. vocational and ICT facilities developed on a competitive basis and dispersed across schools, colleges and work-based learning providers).</p>	<p>The development of institutional infrastructure, physical learning environments and communications to meet the needs of all learners in the local area. Institutional self-interest is subordinate to area-wide agreements.</p>
<p>6. <i>New accountability framework</i> e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance measures • Progression targets • Local quality assurance and improvement systems 	<p>National government steering mechanisms and policy (e.g. performance tables, targets and funding) continue to drive institutional self-interest and inhibit collaboration. Little development of local accountability mechanisms.</p>	<p>New government mechanisms (e.g. 14-19 Entitlement, prospectus and progression targets) used to strengthen local accountability frameworks. Development of agreed local quality assurance systems and area-wide performance measures.</p>

What progress has been made in 2007?

During 2007, the number of collaborative initiatives has again increased significantly. It is apparent, however, that relatively few have yet grown to maturity. Both practical and external factors continue to distract providers from developing fully inclusive local learning systems.

Over the last year, 14-19 partnerships have come together in most areas of the country to develop and put forward proposals for 'Gateway status' to deliver the first round of Diplomas from September 2008 and the second round is now underway. The Diploma Gateway process was set up by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills) in the summer of 2006 as a way of assessing which 14-19 partnerships should receive funding to pilot the first five Diploma lines⁷. The most important criterion for selection was evidence of collaborative working, although applications were also assessed regarding: facilities, workforce development, information, advice and guidance; and employer engagement. Consortia were given a grade from 1-4 (with 4 being the lowest) to indicate their state of readiness. Around half of the applications were graded 4, so it can be assumed that these partnerships were still at an early stage of development. Beyond this, the evidence from this exercise does not allow for precise judgements about how far 14-19 consortia have moved in the direction of strongly collaborative systems in the past year. However, a small number of

partnerships, particularly in the Pathfinder areas (e.g. Wolverhampton, Kingswood, York, Cumbria and Gateshead), appear to have developed more advanced features, such as shared provision, common timetabling, joint funding, and quality assurance systems. One, in particular, has adopted a fully inclusive approach, covering provision for all learners, not just those seeking a vocational alternative to GCSEs and A Levels. Even these more 'mature' partnerships, however, do not show dramatic progress along all the dimensions of the strongly collaborative model in Figure 1.

From discussions with practitioners and comments on earlier drafts of this paper, it can be concluded that some progress has been made in relation to Dimensions 1 (vision), 3 (planning and organisation), 4 (pedagogy and leadership) and 5 (learning environments and communications systems). Less progress has been made in Dimensions 2 (qualifications and assessment) and 6 (accountability frameworks including league tables). These latter two dimensions, arguably, are the most powerful because, in combination, they have a major influence on the competitive relationships between institutions. Neither is fully within the control of local consortia. Even where partnerships develop a stronger local strategy, it has been constrained by national qualifications and accountability policies.

⁷DfES (2006) *The Specialised Diploma Gateway*. London: DfES.

Moreover, there are tensions within government policy between encouraging collaboration and competition, with the introduction of new sixth forms and academies threatening the climate of collaboration in many areas. The effect of the formation of school or school/college federations has yet to be seen and policies such as Every Child Matters⁸, which encourages multi-agency working, are characterised by an emphasis on institutional autonomy.

Conclusion: towards strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems?

Despite recent progress, current 14-19 organisational arrangements largely remain weakly collaborative. Government policy still faces two ways, encouraging both competition and collaboration. As a result, 14-19 partnerships are fragile and important issues of equity and efficiency still have to be addressed.

It is clear that the Government, working with local authorities and the LSC, will need to more actively encourage the development of more strongly collaborative learning systems to enable 14-19 partnerships to deliver the learner Entitlement and to address issues of inequity and inefficiency.

The Nuffield Review thus argues that the Government should consider a six-point programme to create strongly collaborative learning systems in every locality:

1. Recognise that institutional collaboration helps, and competition hinders, learners' prospects in 14-19 education and training.

2. Strengthen the leadership capacity of Local Authorities while also exploring the role for regional bodies in co-ordinating those aspects of 14-19 development that go beyond local authority boundaries (for example, the planning of specialist vocational provision).

3. Introduce area-wide accountability measures to provide common goals for partnership institutions. These could include:

- area-wide performance indicators for participation, achievement and progression, monitored by Ofsted;
- shared quality assurance and improvement systems between partners;
- local area targets, developed on a 'bottom-up' basis by partnerships;
- funding incentives for collaborative provision and practices and greater clarity about funding learning which takes place across more than one site;
- local area inspections and reviews against specified criteria on collaboration.

⁸DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*. London: DfES.

4. Encourage institutional collaboration to develop the learning opportunities for all 14-19 year olds – this will range from providing greater choice of provision for Entry Level learners to more opportunities for Advanced Level learners to gain educational experience in the community and working life.

5. Provide a focus for a wider range of teachers, college lecturers and work-based trainers to collaborate locally around improving the quality of learning – the 14-19 extended project would constitute a very good starting point.

6. Be prepared to make all institutions (including Academies) accountable locally and regionally and consider the rationalisation of post-16 institutions to promote choice of provision, equity and efficiency.

The following people have been involved in the production of this Issues Paper: Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours. The ideas in the paper were debated and elaborated on as a result of a number of discussions and seminars involving the Nuffield Review Advisory Committee, the Nuffield Review Core Group and the 14-19 Alliance.

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