

# SKOPE

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### Raising Expectations: the New Role of Local Authorities in 14-19 Education and Training in England

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#### Summary

*In March 2008, the UK government published a white paper outlining major changes to the governance arrangements for the skills system in England. A key part of these proposals is to give local authorities (LAs) the lead role in commissioning and funding 14-19 provision in their area from 2010. After two decades during which central government has increased its control over almost every aspect of publicly-funded education and training, the commitment to devolve more power to the local level would appear to mark a significant shift in policy direction. Drawing upon new research, involving interviews with senior staff in LAs and other key stakeholders, this issues paper examines the challenges confronting LAs and asks how far these reforms represent a genuine devolution of power.*

#### Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the skills system in England has become increasingly centralised since the mid-1980s, with policy decided by a small coterie of senior ministers and civil servants and enacted through government agencies, top-down targets and endless policy initiatives (Keep 2006, Coffield et al. 2008). One element within this story has been the vastly diminished role allotted to elected local government. In 1992, further education (FE) colleges were removed from the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and their funding directed through the Further Education Funding Council. Colleges were henceforth expected to compete for students and funding, along with schools and other providers, as the government set about creating a 'quasi-market' for education. Consequently, LAs saw their influence over what were now essentially

autonomous institutions eroded, a process which continued after 2001 with the creation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) responsible for funding and planning all post-16 learning outside higher education.

Despite marginalisation, LAs nevertheless continued to play a role in 14-19 arrangements, not least through their involvement in local '14-19 partnerships' aimed at facilitating cooperation between providers in support of student participation, progression and achievement (Hodgson and Spours 2007). In recent years, this role has been recognised by government, with LAs given responsibility, alongside the LSC, for ensuring that young people have access to a full 14-19 curriculum entitlement.

The new white paper, *Raising Expectations: Enabling the System to Deliver* (DCSF/DIUS 2008), goes a step further by transferring 16-19 funding from the LSC to LAs from 2010 and making them the 'single local strategic leader' for planning, commissioning and funding 14-19 provision in England. Such moves might be read as part of the 'new localism' (Stoker 2004) that has gained currency under Gordon Brown's premiership, and an opportunity to rein back from the centralism of the past by creating a new and potentially significant role for elected local government in planning local provision. Some commentators remain sceptical however; Coffield (2008: 49) referring to 'another raft of top down policies', dressed up with 'claims to be devolving power.' Are we witnessing then a genuine devolution of power to LAs or simply the latest instalment in a long running saga of centralised governance and control?

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## Raising expectations: the proposals

Under the new proposals, the LSC will be abolished in 2010 and replaced with three new government agencies. LAs will be supported in their new role by a 'slim national' Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA), accountable to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). A new National Apprenticeship Service, reporting to DCSF and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, will have end-to-end responsibility for the funding and management of apprenticeships. In terms of post-19/adult skills, a new 'streamlined' Skills Funding Agency (SFA), will route funding through a more market-oriented and 'demand-led' system centred on Train to Gain and new individual Skills Accounts.

At 14-19, the aim is to have a single body responsible for commissioning and integrating all children's services, with LAs viewed as best placed to ensure that all young people in their area have access to high quality learning entitlements, including A-levels, GCSEs, apprenticeships, 14-19 diplomas and a new 'foundation learning tier' (below level 2). In their lead commissioning role, LAs will be required to analyse demand for courses from young people and ensure that appropriate provision is in place locally. These new arrangements are presented as critical to the success of the government's policy to raise the compulsory participation age to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015.

The white paper acknowledges that many young people travel to learn with a provider outside the LA area in which they themselves reside. In order to take account of these patterns, it proposes a preferred commissioning model, whereby neighbouring councils work together in sub-regional groupings and agree commissioning decisions across a functional area. Where LAs are unable to develop suitable arrangements, the YPLA will be empowered to 'step in' and commission provision directly from FE colleges. Otherwise its role will be confined to exercising overall budgetary control and providing LAs with technical assistance (e.g. analysis of travel-to-learn data). In making commissioning decisions, LAs will also be expected to take account of the needs of employers and the local labour market as well as 'the priorities for economic development set out in the region's integrated strategy' (DCSF/DIUS 2008: 30). To facilitate this, the white paper proposes the establishment of an informal regional planning forum, to be 'co-chaired' by LAs and the Regional Development Agency (RDA), and including representatives from the Government Office for the Region, the YPLA and the SFA.

## Challenges

The remainder of this issues paper examines some of the challenges that LAs face in their new role, drawing

upon interviews recently undertaken with Directors of Children's Services, the LSC, FE college principals, Connexions and an RDA.

### *Capacity issues*

The most immediate challenge concerns whether LAs will have the capacity, skills and support to undertake this new commissioning function. In recent years, LEAs have been replaced with Directorates of Children's Services for whom 14-19 education and training is merely one element within a much broader portfolio of responsibilities, and many have only small numbers of staff assigned to this part of their activity. The government acknowledges that the transfer of personnel from the LSC, with the necessary skills and expertise, into LAs is vitally important and has asked the LSC to help identify those staff who are currently undertaking functions that will move across in 2010 (DCSF 2008).

The research revealed serious misgivings, however, within LAs and the LSC, about how this transition would be managed and whether the transfer of LSC staff would take place as expected. Initial surveys of LSC staff indicated that most would prefer to remain within one of the newly created government agencies. One local LSC officer noted that although many LSC staff were now working quite closely with LAs in developing 'shadow' commissioning arrangements, *'they don't always like what they see'* with some LAs perceived as being *'extremely hierarchical'*.

### *Bureaucracy and funding*

Another set of concerns revolved around the complexity of the proposed commissioning arrangements. The transfer of commissioning responsibilities to 147 local authorities, coupled with the requirement to agree commissioning decisions at multiple levels – local, sub-regional and regional – was regarded by many interviewees as overly cumbersome, with some referring to what they perceived as a potential *'bureaucratic nightmare'*. One LSC officer was concerned in particular that the proposed sub-regional groupings had no statutory authority, with commissioning responsibility residing ultimately with individual local authorities. Another LSC officer commented,

*'If a cluster of LAs resorts back to every individual LA cabinet to make their own decisions, you have got the world's most bureaucratic and unwieldy system and a system which will be driven by the lowest common denominator.'*

Such concerns were also shared by two FE college principals, one of whom stated,

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*'it looks very complex...I would rather have stayed with the old LSC system than to see government, at a time of significant pressures upon public funding, investing in a new one which is untested and unproven.'*

Among some LA interviewees, there was a concern that they were acquiring not only a highly complex administrative function but also a series of potentially difficult decisions around resource prioritisation at a time when public funding was under pressure. An LA lead 14-19 coordinator commented,

*'the part of the chalice that I don't like is that...LAs will find themselves in a position whereby they will have to say do I fund special needs properly post-16 – very expensive – or do we look at those high tech programmes in an FE college, or do we look at the more general vocational programmes or diplomas.'*

#### *Local authority leadership*

A key question is how far LAs are in a position to plan coherent forms of local provision which meet the needs of *all* learners in their area. While interviewees were able to cite positive examples of local 14-19 partnerships, even in areas where these worked relatively well there were concerns that they often remained difficult to sustain and generalise in a context where institutions were also competitors for students and funding. An LA officer remarked,

*'we have good partnerships in the North East, that's true... [but] there isn't a whole system of control. What you have at the moment is government thrashing around for mechanisms to facilitate, encourage and indeed require a level of cooperative endeavour.'*

These problems were often visible in the case of the new 14-19 diplomas, the delivery of which necessitates a high level of collaboration across schools, colleges and employers. An LA officer in Warwickshire explained how the attitude among some high performing schools and grammar schools was still one of *'it doesn't affect us, we don't want to know.'* One senior LSC officer described the reliance upon *'single institutional models of governance and management'*, therefore, as *'plain crackers'*, and argued that there was a need for *'some kind of regulatory instruments to get schools and colleges to collaborate more.'*

Many interviewees argued that the problem was further compounded by the presence of school academies and the so-called 'presumption right' which allows schools and academies to open their own sixth forms, irrespective of local needs. Some interviewees questioned whether LAs would be able and willing to face down lobbying pressures from middle class parents and close sixth forms where there was a strong case for

re-organisation on efficiency and equity grounds. The findings lend considerable support to those commentators who question how far LAs are in a position to lead 'strongly collaborative local learning systems' in a context where institutions remain autonomous, national policy levers encourage competitive behaviour, and government policy continues to be biased in favour of particular forms of provision, notably school sixth forms (Hodgson and Spours 2007, Fletcher and Perry 2008).

#### *Raising the participation age*

While LAs will have responsibility for ensuring that every 17 year old is in education or training by 2013, it is far from clear whether the levers being placed at their disposal will prove adequate to the task at hand. Much depends upon the new 14-19 diplomas proving sufficiently attractive to learners who would otherwise choose not to engage and the delivery of the government's guarantee of an apprenticeship place to every young person who wants one. The diplomas, the first five of which have been rolled out from September 2008, are still at a very early stage of development and it is too soon to predict what impact this latest round of qualification reform will have. There are, however, concerns that some of the diplomas are overly theoretical in their design, especially for learners who would benefit from more practical forms of learning (Stanton 2008), while a big question mark hangs over the extent to which these new qualifications will be valued by employers in the labour market.

Besides long-standing concerns around the variable quality of apprenticeships in the UK, simply getting employers to provide sufficient places is challenging enough even in relatively good economic times, let alone in a period of recession when training budgets are likely to be cut and staff are being laid off. For those within the NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) group, research suggests that they are likely to respond best to highly bespoke forms of provision, often work-based, which tend to be resource intensive and which again may be difficult to sustain as public funding gets squeezed. Finally, some of the more powerful levers that might be used to alter existing patterns of participation in learning, such as the more extensive use of 'licence to practice' regulations that one finds in much of Northern Europe, are currently not on the political agenda.

#### *Joining up learner and employer demand*

In addition to commissioning provision that satisfies the choices of learners, LAs will also be required to take account of local employer and labour market needs as well as regional economic development priorities. Matching learner study preferences with local job

availability and future economic development needs is a perennial problem and one that is fraught with tension. Clearly, there is a role for effective Information, Advice and Guidance so that young people and parents are in a position to make informed choices in light of current and predicted labour market needs. Leaving aside the difficulties associated with skills forecasting, even where areas of job growth can be identified, getting young people to embrace those opportunities is not always straightforward. This is especially the case where the projected expansion is in sectors, such as retailing and hospitality, where pay is often low and progression opportunities limited.

Several interviewees argued that future progress would depend on building greater synergy between 14-19 commissioning and a local and regional economic regeneration agenda aimed at expanding worthwhile job opportunities. The recent *Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration* (HM Treasury et al. 2007), which requires LAs to undertake local economic assessments, also points in this direction and suggests that forging such links will become increasingly important. This again raises the issue of how far LAs – who have not led on these issues and whose involvement with economic development activity is in many cases quite limited – are in a position to develop a more ‘joined up’ and strategic approach and, crucially, whether they can effectively engage employers in this process.

## Conclusions

The paper has explored some of the challenges facing LAs in their new strategic commissioning role in relation to 14-19 education and training. Some of these challenges revolve around LA capacity and whether they have the necessary powers at their disposal to effectively shape local provision. It could be argued, however, that what is being *devolved* to LAs is not so much power as the *responsibility* for administering a complex commissioning function, tough decisions around resource allocation in a period of fiscal constraint, and the task of delivering increased participation through a set of 14-19 learning entitlements as determined by central government – in short, *accountability without control*. The real test, of course, will be how these new arrangements function in practice after 2010.

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## Further Details

Jonathan Payne is a SKOPE senior research fellow. This Issues Paper draws upon his recent SKOPE research paper: ‘Scoring opportunity or hospital pass? The changing role of local authorities in 14-19 education and training in England’, SKOPE Research Paper No. 85, which can be downloaded from the SKOPE website.

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