

**FROM WEAK TO STRONG COLLABORATION IN
14-19 EDUCATION AND TRAINING
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1. Why is 14-19 important and why collaborate?

England and Wales are alone in defining upper secondary education in terms of a 14-19 phase that crosses compulsory and post-compulsory education. The idea of 14-19, which has gradually emerged over the last 20 years since the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, is a particular English and Welsh response to low post-16 participation rates when compared with other advanced industrial nations (OECD 2006). There is widespread agreement in the English education system that this approach to upper secondary education has the potential to overcome the deep-seated problem of a 16+ divide, which has drawn many young people into the labour market early. This labour market 'pull' has been exacerbated in England by a GCSE examination system at 16, with a benchmark of 5A*-C grades, which demoralizes a large proportion of 14-16 year olds and reduces their choice of study in post-compulsory education and training. Other advanced industrial countries neither have such a high-stakes national examination at the age of 16 nor do they allow unskilled young people to enter the labour market at this age.

The 14-19 phase is also important from a young person's point of view because it marks a period of transition between compulsory schooling and adult and working life when they are searching for self-identity and greater control over their lives. However, as Lumby and Foskett (2005) point out, 14-19 education has become a site of tension and competing interests – families seeking success for their children; employers wanting short-term and inexpensive outcomes; governments aiming to maximize longer-term returns for the economy and society; and higher education keen to both select and to recruit the 'products' of the 14-19 phase. These competing interests interact with organisational and curricular divisions within the system, often to the detriment of young people's needs and desires.

The Government sees institutional collaboration as a vital dimension of 14-19 reform in order to improve participation rates and to meet the needs of learners. Arguments for 14-19 collaboration currently revolve around the aim of extending the range of vocational provision, particularly for 14-16 year olds, to increase their choice of study and to create more viable progression ladders from pre-16 to post-16 education and training. Moreover, from 2013, 14-19 year olds will have a statutory right of access to the 14 lines of Specialised Diplomas, which must be available in each 'local area'. Accepted policy and practitioner wisdom is that no single institution can adequately support this national statutory 14-19 Entitlement on its own, so collaboration is required. This policy momentum will also be supported by the recent announcement that the Government intends to raise the 'school leaving age' to 18. If one hundred per cent of learners are expected, by statute, to participate in some form of education and training up to the age of 18, then serious thought will have to be given to how all providers - education, work-based and community-based - can work together to offer the wide range of learning opportunities required to meet the needs of all learners in a locality.

While on the increase, and stimulated in England by the demands of the recent Specialised Diploma Gateway process, 14-19 institutional collaboration is, nevertheless, in its early days and markedly fragile. This national pattern of what we term 'weakly collaborative' partnership (Hodgson and Spours 2006), can be

contrasted with the possible development of the 'strongly collaborative local learning systems' outlined in this paper. We argue here that the type of collaboration needed to support the learning and progression of all 14-19 year olds will require more cohesive institutional relations and more collective decision-making and planning in a locality. Such a shift will be encouraged not only by improving professional capacity and leadership (see Jackson 2006), but also by changes to the 'rules of governance and accountability' that actively incentivise collaboration and reduce competition.

This think-piece, therefore, looks at the 'current state of play' regarding collaborative activity; examines the balance of enabling and inhibiting factors affecting institutional partnership and briefly explores the concept and implications of developing 'strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems', as a possible way forward.

2. 14-19 partnership and institutional collaboration: the current state of play

While competition and selection still appear to be the dominant features of institutional arrangements in England, institutional collaboration is growing not only because of the national policy drive resulting from the 14-19 White Paper (DfES 2005), but also because institutions themselves recognize the benefits of collaboration for their own organisations and learners. For schools with small sixth forms, collaboration can provide economies of scale and greater choice of A Levels; schools without sixth forms benefit from collaboration because it allows them to provide a more motivational curriculum for 14-16 year olds and clearer progression routes post-16, while for colleges and work-based learning providers, collaboration with schools potentially attracts more learners into post-16 vocational courses. Research evidence suggests that collaborative arrangements can also enhance the quality of provision through collective staff and institutional development (Hayward *et al.* 2006).

Recent studies on collaboration (e.g. Higham and Yeomans 2006) note that the scope of collaborative arrangements is expanding and now goes beyond catering for 16-19 year-olds and increasingly involves 14-16 year-olds, part-time learners, employers and training providers. Models of collaboration, however, vary significantly. They range from tight 'federations' based on formal agreements to raise standards, through 'consortia' of voluntary groupings of institutions, involving schools, colleges, and, in a small number of cases, work-based learning providers and small groups of institutions that have come together to extend provision, to informal occasional forms of collaboration around specific projects.

The common feature of all these models is their attempt to offset the negative effects of a predominantly competitive and divided education and training system in order to meet the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' progression needs of particular groups of learners in a local area. Beyond this, there is a great deal of variation both in the learners they serve, the type of provision they offer, the degree of institutional autonomy and integration and their model of governance, with many currently sustained by short-term national funding related to particular initiatives.

The development of 14-19 area partnerships has, however, accelerated in the last couple of years as a result of national government initiatives such as the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) and the 14-19 Implementation Plan. Since the publication of the 14-19 White Paper in 2005, policy has moved decisively

into an implementation phase with the introduction of a range of national policy mechanisms (e.g. the Specialised Diploma Gateway, Learning Visits and the requirement for 14-19 area local prospectuses) designed to encourage collaboration at the local level. In the majority, if not all, local areas, 14-19 Partnerships are being formed; they are mapping their current 14-19 provision; introducing more vocational or applied provision, particularly pre-16 at Levels 1 and 2; attempting to assess future learner needs; considering progression routes for learners and preparing local prospectuses and entitlement statements. A smaller proportion of partnerships are at a more advanced stage where they are looking at shared provision, common timetabling and joint funding, accommodation, appointments and quality assurance systems. While there is broad agreement on the need to build vocational provision and capacity, some localities are taking a more comprehensive view of change than is implied in the 14-19 White Paper and are following a more unified and inclusive approach aimed at including all learners and not just those involved with vocational learning.

Despite recent developments, most 14-19 Partnerships are still at an early stage and all demonstrate to a greater or lesser degree 'weakly collaborative' symptoms that are likely to impede further development (e.g.

- joint provision actively operates with a relatively small proportion of learners, in many cases the most disaffected;
- collaboration affects only some staff and some institutions with the most selective and prestigious institutions less likely to be involved;
- there is more collaborative development pre-16 than post-16;
- collaboration has minimal impact on the general (as opposed to the vocational) curriculum, with the exception of limited collaboration over 'minority' A Level subjects;
- there are varying degrees of institutional commitment based on the ethos of the institution and its governors;
- there is little involvement of parents and governors;
- collaboration is not always sustainable, being highly dependent on external funding incentives, lacking economies of scale and proving costly in terms of staff time and transport.

Even in those areas where there are well-established partnership arrangements, 14-19 co-ordinators are concerned about how they will be able to meet the demands of the national 14-19 Entitlement, with a recent LEACAN survey (Tirrell *et al.* 2006) indicating that the key barrier to implementation is the lack of willingness of schools to collaborate.

3. Weakly collaborative arrangements - drivers and inhibitors

The 2005 Annual Report from the Nuffield 14-19 Review, drawing on national evaluations in IFP and 14-19 Partnerships (e.g. Golden *et al.* 2005, Higham and Yeomans 2006), noted ten factors that support effective collaboration:

- shared aims and objectives and clear remits for the organisations involved;
- strong and effective leadership and co-ordination and well trained and committed teaching staff;
- good personal relationships between staff in different organisations;
- effective quality assurance systems and procedures for measuring a partnership's achievements;
- access to additional funding to support collaboration;

- effective communication structures, particularly in relation to information on learner progress;
- common timetabling;
- lack of hierarchy between local institutions;
- a history and culture of collaboration locally including the role of strong local identities;
- urban regeneration agenda, the identification of skills gaps and labour market need.

What is striking about the points listed above is that they are all reflections of the positive side of voluntarism spurred on by common ideals held by practitioners. What they lack is a consistent and strong national framework within which voluntary action and local leadership can be effective and sustainable.

This broadening of provision for 14-19 year olds through collaboration has been supported, to a degree, by the effects of particular policy levers, such as area-wide inspections, Strategic Area Reviews and dedicated funding for collaboration from the Increased Flexibility Programme and 14-19 Pathfinders (Spours *et al.* 2007). These initiatives have not always been sustained and the struggle between competition and collaboration, remains unequal, with relatively weak policy levers and initiatives working against a deeply embedded and historical set of competitive institutional arrangements. As Figure 1 shows, the dominant policy levers - performance tables, targets, funding and institutional inspection - tend to support institutional autonomy and competition for learners.

Figure 1. The effects of national policy steering mechanisms on institutional behaviour and collaboration

National policy steering mechanism	Effects on institutional behaviour	Effects on collaboration
Performance tables and targets	Performance tables and targets promote exclusion (e.g. 5A*-C GCSE benchmark encourages schools to focus on certain learners and not on others and the Level 2 target for FE colleges focuses attention at this level).	Almost entirely negative because performance tables and targets relate to individual institutions and encourage competition rather than collaboration.
Institutional inspection	Encourages institutions to focus on improvement. Also encourages selection because of the focus on examination results and doing well with the post-16 learners you have. Does not require schools to cater for all learners.	Largely negative because this type of inspection assesses performance and quality of provision at the individual institutional level rather than for collaborative arrangements.
14-19 area-wide inspection and Strategic Area Review	Focus on provision within an area and the needs of all learners.	Important incentive for collaboration but temporary and has clashed with other forms of inspection.
Funding	Encourages recruitment with less emphasis on retention and	Both positive and negative. Collaboration is expensive and funding

	achievement. At advanced level, encourages large programmes of study for individual learners. Certain dedicated funding streams (e.g. IFP and 14-19 Pathfinders) encourage collaboration.	dependent but dedicated funding is currently available. Collaboration can make provision more cost-effective by increasing participation and class sizes.
Qualifications	The current divided qualifications system promotes institutional specialisation and, therefore, selection.	Mainly negative because very few individual qualifications require institutional collaboration. However, improving and diversifying learner programmes of study does.
Policy initiatives	Promote both collaboration (e.g. 14-19 Green and White Papers and 14-19 initiatives) and competition (e.g. DfES Five Year Strategy with its emphasis on academies, trust schools and sixth form presumption)	Currently a mildly positive effect on collaboration because of the stress on a 14-19 phase rather than a break at 16. This has been disrupted by the Five-Year Strategy.

In addition, there are wider system factors that further increase the instability of current weakly collaborative arrangements. Demographic forecasting suggests that there will be a significant national decline in the number of young people over the next decade. While this position will affect some parts of the country more acutely than others – nationally, there will be an oversupply of places for 14-19 year olds (DfES 2005). Schools and colleges, individually, may respond by competing more aggressively for the limited supply of learners. Rationalisation of places, however, is more likely to be achieved through institutions working in collaboration to meet the new needs of learners in the local area. This demographic downturn will be accompanied by national funding constraints, which are already being felt within the learning and skills sector. These external pressures will expose the practical internal fragilities of weakly collaborative arrangements and will highlight, in particular, their voluntarism and their lack of cost effectiveness.

4. Towards a strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning system

The collaborative agenda is, therefore, finely balanced - many positive 'internal' factors linked to good leadership and professional practice, a strong educational rationale and some encouraging policy drivers. However, in our engagement with practitioners at the local level we hear that the momentum for collaboration is being inhibited most strongly by 'external' factors linked to the academic/vocational divide and competitive institutional relations, supported by powerful national policy levers, such as performance tables.

So how do we move forward? The Nuffield 14-19 Annual Report (Hayward *et al.* 2006) suggested that over time, 14-19 partnership arrangements could move

from weakly to strongly collaborative along the six dimensions listed in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Weakly and strongly collaborative approaches to 14-19 learning systems: a local perspective

Dimensions and 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 general provision, 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 with a focus on specialist vocational provision from 14+ for learners unable to participate in GCSEs and A Levels. A primary goal is motivating disaffected 14-16 year olds, using college and work-based provision as an alternative curriculum and an alternative site of learning</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+. The primary goal is to broaden the general curriculum to make it more motivational and to focus strongly vocational provision post-16 and at the higher levels</p>
<p>3. <i>Planning, organisation and governance in 'a local area'</i> (e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAs, LSCs and Connexions working together to deliver the entitlement • Forming partnerships and clusters • Developing local prospectuses 	<p>Confused or contested relationships between LAs, LLSCs and providers with diminished area governance capacity. Partnerships and clusters are under-developed, external funding dependent and easily destabilised by institutional competition, institutional hierarchies and the threat of new providers.</p>	<p>Clear and accepted local governance arrangements in which there is a high degree of collaboration between LAs, LLSCs, Connexions and local providers, thus increasing governance capacity and leadership. Less institutional hierarchy and a stronger shared concept of local need with an emphasis on area planning and possible rationalisation of both provision and institutions</p>
<p>4. <i>Professionalism, pedagogy and leadership</i> (e.g.</p>	<p>Conformity to the Government reform agenda without a strong</p>	<p>Strong sense of local professionalism, leadership and a shared</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathfinders • Learning Visits • Development networks and joint CPD 	<p>professionally informed sense of what is required at the local level. Limited leadership, CPD and a dependence on nationally generated support mechanisms with a short-term, 'what works' approach to development</p>	<p>knowledge of the area; a more reflective, longer-term, planned and locally generated approach to capacity building with a use of pooled local and national funding and a discriminating use of national resources</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 • ICT infrastructure • Pooling funding 	<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>Development of institutional infrastructure, physical learning environments and communications to meet the needs of all learners in the local area to attain optimum efficiency. Individual 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) drive institutional self-interest and inhibit collaboration. Little development of local accountability mechanisms to support partnership working</p>	<p>Use of new government mechanisms (e.g. 14-19 entitlement, prospectuses and progression targets) to strengthen local accountability frameworks. Development of agreed local quality assurance systems and area-wide performance measures to increase confidence in collaborative provision and to strengthen an area-wide performance logic.</p>

It is important to note that weakly and strongly collaborative approaches are not in opposition to one another, but that the latter are an extension of the former. In this sense, it might be more appropriate to see the two concepts as on a continuum, with 14-19 partnerships currently lying at different points on this continuum in each of the six dimensions. Moreover, certain dimensions are more nationally constrained than others. In particular, dimension 2 (curriculum and qualifications) and dimension 6 (accountability frameworks) are strongly determined by national policy agendas and also shape the other four dimensions to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless, within these national constraints, 14-19 Partnerships can take a more reactive or a more proactive stance to the 14-19 agenda depending on their confidence as a partnership and their education philosophical position.

The argument for partnerships to move towards a more strongly collaborative system, however, is not simply based on a particular philosophical stance on national policy. Strongly collaborative systems are also important for addressing deep-seated practical and cultural problems at the local level within the English and Welsh systems. Three of these stand out.

First, it is our contention that motivating disaffected learners requires more than the introduction of specialist vocational provision pre-16. Addressing disaffection has to be seen within the much broader parameters of reforming secondary education as a whole to tackle the roots of alienation rather than simply treating its symptoms. This type of reform demands a culture shift and collaboration between all practitioners, not just those running vocational programmes.

Second, in a period of financial constraint, institutions need to move towards the concept of a local learning system that shows genuine regard for the efficient use of area resources for the benefit of all learners. This may mean pooling vocational accommodation and equipment, rationalising school sixth form places and a more planned approach to using employer placements.

Third, there is strong evidence that an institutional division of labour in a local area, resulting from institutional diversity and competition, exacerbates social divisions (Stanton and Fletcher 2006). Stanton and Fletcher argue that 11-18 schools and sixth form colleges continue to offer more Level 3 provision than other providers and are able to select the most capable learners, while further education colleges are the main providers of Level 1 and 2 courses post-16. They point out that because Level 3 provision attracts higher levels of funding, the most socially advantaged continue to receive better resourcing than the disadvantaged, despite the greater needs of the latter. Citing research commissioned by the Learning and Skills Research Centre (Schagen *et al.* 2006), they also point to the minimal effects of different patterns of institutional configurations on levels of participation and attainment. They conclude, therefore, that it is important to focus on approaches to organisation that are able to deliver cost benefits and to reduce social segregation. For these reasons, Stanton and Fletcher go on to argue for a more strongly planned tertiary system that overtly attempts to redress social differences, produces economies of scale and privileges choice of provision over choice of provider.

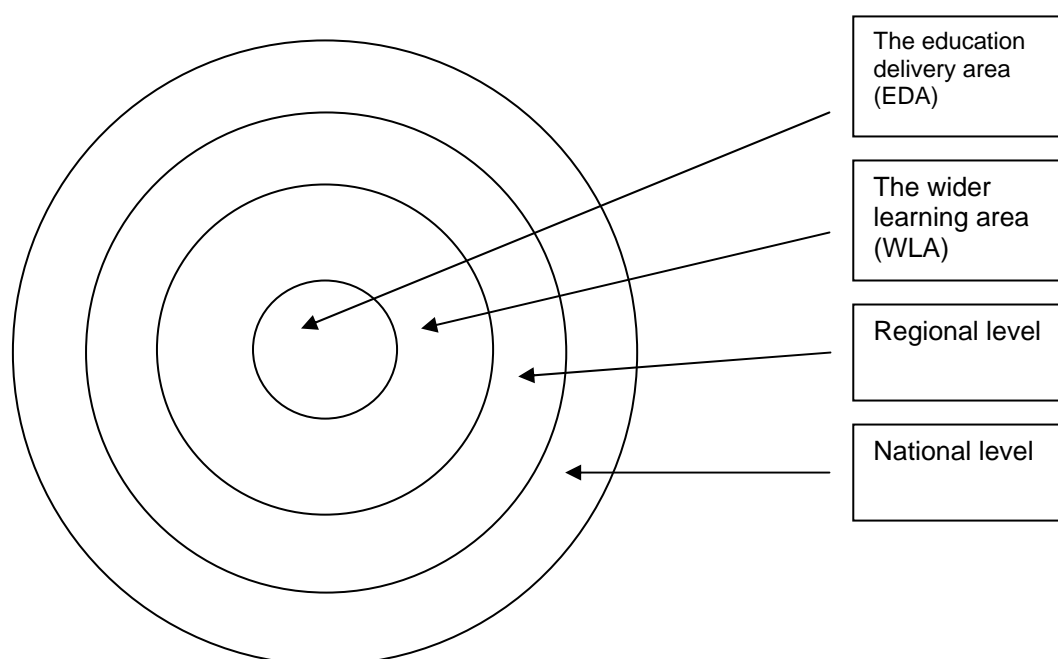
It is clear from this analysis that the full development of strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems will require the synergy of local innovation and national reform, particularly in relation to qualifications, accountability and funding. In the medium term, however, movement from weakly collaborative to more strongly collaborative arrangements could involve tipping the balance of institutional incentives to ensure that potential partners are able to focus attention not only on their own institution and their own learners, but also on the 'learning area' and the attainment and development of all 14-19 learners within it.

This Innovation Unit Enquiry Day will focus, therefore, on the dimensions of an accountability framework or a set of governance rules capable of encouraging a more collective professional consciousness and shared interest in a learning area. Potential measures might include:

- performance indicators based on outcomes at the end of the phase, value-added measures and area-wide attainment and progression;
- local quality assurance and improvement systems to build trust between partners;
- a more devolved approach to target setting - for example the encouragement for a local area to develop its own 'bottom-up' targets;
- a system of funding which incentivises collaborative practice;
- inspection focused on collaboration, relations with wider partners and broader learning outcomes, as well as on individual institutional performance and examination results;
- an increased role for teachers in assessment at the local level, based on national processes of validation and institutional licensing.

A key issue will be the definition of a 'learning area' (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The 14-19 local learning area within the national system



We suggest that this might be illustrated as four concentric circles. At the centre is what we term the 'education delivery area' (EDA) based on the 14-19 Partnership of schools and colleges. The 'wider learning area' (WLA), the second circle, represents an administrative entity that operates at a wider sub-regional level to support a number of EDAs linking with work-based learning providers, employers, voluntary and community organisations, Connexions and other local government agencies in the delivery of expansive learning experiences going beyond what is provided in the EDA. The WLA could also define the boundaries for the local quality assurance and improvement system. Beyond this, as Figure 3 illustrates, lie the regional and national levels of governance which either inhibit or facilitate collaboration in the other two areas.

As we have seen, current government policy stresses the responsibility of localities to deliver the national 14-19 Entitlement. However, what we are suggesting here is that effective practice cannot be achieved simply by a strong practitioner response to national policy, because national constraints inhibit innovative local development. The Government has to appreciate that the role of practitioners should not be confined simply to implementation: professionals need to be fully involved in the whole policy process. Practitioners and employers also need to recognise their responsibility for shaping national policy. Strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems can only be achieved through proactive stakeholders working together with government in a more open, reciprocal and deliberative way to make the kind of tough decisions that are needed to ensure equitable, effective and efficient 14-19 provision in every locality.

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