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Education for employment and life: collaborative good practice between local authorities and the further education sector

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Background

In 2010 planning and funding responsibilities for 16-19 year olds will be transferred from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) back to the local authorities (LAs). LAs will have responsibility for commissioning and funding all education and training for young people up to the age of 19, making them the strategic lead for all children's services from 0 to 19. It is hoped that this will create a unified and coherent system for young people aged 14-19 (and 14-25 for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD)) at local, sub-regional and regional levels. Collaborative ways of working between LAs and further education (FE) colleges (and other partners) will be important to the future of education, skills and training in this sector.

Research Questions

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake research to provide evidence of good practice in relationships between LAs and FE colleges.

The key aim of this research was to establish good practice in terms of collaborative partnerships between LAs and FE colleges where these formal and informal relationships were perceived to have contributed to positive outcomes for young people in terms of progression and engagement.

Methods

A sample frame of potential case-study areas of LAs and/or FE colleges was identified from the following sources:

- the Association of Colleges (AoC), who identified LAs/FE colleges that exhibited elements of good practice in terms of collaboration
- LAs and FE colleges selected on the basis of Ofsted inspection grades - areas were only included where there was evidence of high achievement from LA and FE viewpoints (as identified in Ofsted reports) **and** a reported working relationship (screening questions were used to establish the existence of perceived good working relationships between the LA and the college that may have contributed to improved outcomes for young people).

A sample of nine case-study areas was drawn up from the sample frame, including at least one from each Government Office Region apart from London. Case studies included interviews with key staff involved in collaboration between the LA and the FE college. Additional interviews, where appropriate, were conducted in other organisations such as Connexions (although formally now part of the LA, they were often viewed to be separate entities), sixth form colleges and schools, if they were perceived to be significant to the collaborative relationship. Interviews were conducted at strategic and operational levels. Visits to LAs and FE colleges, and supplementary telephone interviews, took place between April and July 2009.

Frame

The research methods were underpinned by an analytical frame that ensured that the range of evidence from the various stakeholders relating to the research questions were collated to provide a thematic overview of the types of collaborative good practice evident in our case studies. Three key themes emerged from the analytical framework:

- the range and quality of educational and training provision for young people aged 14-19
- the types of transition support provided to young people
- Information, advice and guidance made available to young people.

Research findings

Effective collaboration between the LAs and FE colleges was perceived to have contributed to improved progression and engagement of young people in education and training.

Key features of collaboration viewed as necessary to secure a positive impact on young people in terms of transition, progression and engagement were:

- mutual trust, respect, openness, honesty, transparency and equality of standing between partners were reported to be crucial in order to instigate confidence between collaborators
- regular and robust communication systems, including informal email and face-to-face contact
- the involvement of key senior, strategic leaders was perceived to be vital to secure high level support and credibility
- the establishment of a shared vision, joined-up thinking and structures with clear roles and responsibilities and agreed systems and processes
- a shared commitment to driving up standards for young people.

Always putting the interests of the learner first was also considered an essential ingredient of collaboratively improving outcomes for young people.

Impact and relevance to the learning and skills sector

Movement of the responsibility for planning and funding for 16-19 year olds has a clear implication for the learning and skills sector. Effective collaboration between LAs and FE colleges will be crucial in ensuring the best possible outcomes for learners. This research demonstrates good practice and raises important issues for collaborating partners to consider as the responsibility is handed over, and should be useful to all those involved in providing for this age group.

The main challenges to successful collaboration that emerged from this research were the time needed to work in partnership effectively both in terms of longevity, as there was evidence that all these partnerships were initiated a number of years ago, and the time to communicate informally between more formal meetings to consolidate collaborative ways of working.