



Learning+Skills Council

The impact of area-wide inspections

LSC response to the report

LSC National Office
April 2004

Background

1. The action plans were selected to demonstrate impact through implementation over time. The areas covered had below average post 16 participation and success rates. They strongly focused on 16-19 issues and took relatively little account of the emerging 14-19 agenda.
2. The findings of the report identified a number of issues that require continuing attention.

Key issues

Increased collaboration and strategic planning between key partners

3. This is a very important finding since the development of 14-19 area inspections requires even closer collaboration between key partners to ensure effective implementation of action plans than was true of the 16-19 area inspections.
4. One of the most encouraging developments has been the willingness of key partners, particularly the LSC and the LEAs to work together more closely with providers in planning post 16 provision. Such planning needs to a willingness to embrace change which puts the learners first. For LEAs in particular, any changes in the nature of school provision will need sensitive handling and sympathetic support from other key partners.

Increasing post 16 participation

5. Increasing post 16 participation is a key task but success is not uniform. Too little is known about the patterns of post 17 participation and local LSCs are working hard in collaboration with others to obtain more accurate evidence upon which they can have action.

Disagreement with area inspection findings

6. As inspections are a snapshot in time and cover a wide area, it is not surprisingly that occasionally there are disagreements about some findings. Greater sharing of judgements, the development of the area inspection framework for 14-19 area inspections, and the criteria for grading should help reduce disagreement. The action plans always provide the opportunity to look at particular issues in more depth and possibly, to come up with an action which may help to clarify some of the original findings and the actions needed.

Initial Advice and Guidance

7. The Connexions Partnerships were only just being developed when these action plans were being written. Undoubtedly the partnerships had some early difficulties, particularly in developing appropriate management structures and ensuring that enough fully-trained personal advisors were available.
8. Improving the quality of advice and guidance provided through Connexions and in schools is a high priority, and development of the 14-19 agenda and actions proposed by the Tomlinson Committee make this even more important. Local LSCs and LEAs are working closely with Connexions partnerships to improve quality and effectiveness. In particular there is widespread awareness that knowledge among learners and their parents about the nature, quality and availability of work-based learning is often patchy. It needs to be remembered that advice and guidance is not the sole responsibility of Connexions but is shared by schools and colleges.

The Need For Access to a Wider Range of Provision

9. One of the key themes of both 16 -19 and now 14-19 area inspection reports has been insufficient provision at level 1 and 2 for post 16 learners and often a mismatch between the work-based training available and both employers' and learners' needs for training. This relates to inclusion since access to courses best suited to learners' immediate past attainment and aptitude, with additional learning support, is vital in sustaining post 16 and post 17 participation. The evidence for the development of new provision at levels 1 and 2 is encouraging.

Variations in Attainment and Achievements

10. Generally achievements and attainment are too low. Even in school sixth forms where achievement rates are generally high, there are significant variations between schools in the same area.
11. Achievement rates are generally lower in further education colleges than sixth form colleges and school sixth forms. However, achievements on entry to colleges are often lower and supporting learners who otherwise may have 'dropped out' at 16 brings difficult (but not insurmountable) challenges in support to enable learners to succeed. The successful development and use of credible value-added data will be important in determining the effectiveness of individual institutions.

Greater Focus on Quality Assurance Procedures

12. Both area inspection reports and action plans have emphasised the need for institutions to have a more secure grasp of their strengths and weaknesses and to have effective systems in place to support improvement. Data issues are also important since without credible data it is difficult or impossible to establish set baselines upon which robust targets can be based.
13. It is important however to stress that quality assurance is a means of securing improvements not an end in itself. The effectiveness of quality assurance must be judged by outcomes and the impact upon learners' success.