

**LEARNING FROM LOCAL EXPERIENCE:  
HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE GOVERNMENT'S 14-19 LEARNING MODEL?**

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**The rise, fall and rise again of local innovation**

The English education and training system, despite its drift towards centralism over the last two decades, has a long record of local innovation. Indeed, in the thirty years following World War Two the dominant policy assumption was that innovation should be local and that particularly in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, there was no role for central government. Thus, George Tomlinson, Minister of Education in the post-war Labour Government proclaimed proudly that: *'Minister knows nowt about curriculum'* (Richmond 1971: 71). The period is often described as an era of 'partnership' between central government, local government and teachers, but the relative powers of the partners was indicated by Bernard Donoghue, advisor to James Callaghan, likening the Department for Education and Science to a post box between the local authorities and the teachers unions (Donoghue 1987). One consequence of this was that local innovation during that period took place in the virtual absence of a national policy framework. As we shall show this is in stark contrast to the conditions in which local innovation is currently taking place. Into the 1980s, due to the role of Technical Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and the ability of awarding bodies to introduce new qualifications, practitioners continued to pioneer curriculum process-based reform – although TVEI also marked a significant stage in the transition from localism to centralism (Hodgson and Spours 1997, Hodgson *et al.* 2004, Yeomans 1998).

While local innovation was often celebrated during this period, it also came in for criticism for its variability, patchiness, absence of theoretical development and lack of systemic impact (e.g. Hargreaves 1989, Rudduck 1986). Thus, from a policy learning perspective, questions arise as to whether in the current context the strengths of local

innovation can be accentuated and the weaknesses diminished.

The bottom-up movement receded in the early 1990s because of the impact of the accountability agenda with a focus on national examination results and performance tables and top-down qualifications reform (e.g. the introduction of GNVQs) and (at 14-16) the introduction of the national curriculum in which professional practice became heavily determined by objectives-led curricula and mechanical, competence-based assessment. Nevertheless, even during this period, teachers in schools and colleges made problematical national initiatives more workable (Higham *et al.* 2002). By the end of the decade, it was the role of external examinations in GCSEs and under *Curriculum 2000* that drove professional practice (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

Local innovation is, however, back on the policy agenda because of 14-19 reform. The Government, in its 14-19 White Paper (DfES 2005a) and in *The 14-19 Implementation Plan* (DfES 2005b), has clearly stated that it will not prescribe every step of the implementation of 14-19 reform. It recognizes that localities will experience different challenges and will have to tailor their strategies accordingly. It is, therefore, up to local partnerships to decide how to deal with key local delivery issues such as governance arrangements (i.e. the co-ordination roles between local authorities, LSCs, institutions and wider stakeholders), the common curriculum framework, transport and so on. The *14-19 Implementation Plan* asserts that experience from Young Apprenticeships and the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) indicates that “*locally agreed approaches have been most effective in enhancing curriculum breadth*” (DfES 2005b: 19).

In stressing a role for local flexibility, the Government is keen to see the exchange of good practice between local 14-19 partnerships. It has, therefore, developed a ‘learning model’ comprising three closely related key elements – a number of ‘best practice’ partnerships derived mainly from 14-19 Pathfinders and Increased Flexibility projects; a programme of Learning Visits and other associated forms of support; and the encouragement of the widespread formation or growth of 14-19 partnerships in areas where they do not exist or are under-developed. The three elements are intended to work

closely together. The best practice partnerships provide system leadership, the Learning Visits and other forms of support act as mechanisms to disseminate best practice and the emerging 14-19 partnerships provide the contexts within which practice can be embedded and developed. The overall aim of the 'learning model' is to increase system capacity, especially in relation to vocational learning and the launch of the new Specialised Diplomas.

The emerging learning model rests on several inter-related assumptions. First, following a period of consultation starting in 2002 and finishing in 2004, the Government has set the framework of 14-19 policy and any freedoms of implementation and delivery will have to be within this framework. As noted above, this constitutes a marked contrast with the earlier era of local innovation. Second, practitioners will want to support the Government in its attempt to broaden 14-19 learning opportunities to motivate learners to help them progress and to make them more employment ready. Third, practitioners and institutions will be willing and able to work in partnerships (and, in fact, will be required to do so) to achieve these aims. Fourth, certain 14-19 partnerships are deemed to be more advanced or to have more experience in the key areas of practice outlined in the 14-19 White Paper because of their involvement with the previous waves of 14-19 Pathfinders and the IFP. Fifth, the more advanced will want to teach those who are less advanced and the not so advanced will want to learn from those with expertise and experience. Once having attained knowledge about good practice, this can be creatively applied locally. Finally, learning and transfer can be achieved in under two years in time for the introduction of the new Specialised Diplomas and other curriculum and qualification changes in 2008.

Using evidence available to date, this chapter undertakes a critical analysis of the three key elements of the Government's 'learning model' – best practice partnerships; Learning Visits and the emerging 14-19 partnerships - within the framework of assumptions outlined above, in order to assess the prognosis for practitioner and policy learning from local 14-19 experience. The chapter argues that there is little evidence the Government is using these mechanisms to inform and shape national policy learning

because of the 'set' nature of the policy agenda arising from the 14-19 White Paper and the rapid pace of reform indicated by *The 14-19 Implementation Plan* for the period up until 2010. Moreover, in this policy context, the effectiveness of practitioner learning and good practice transfer is being compromised by limitations within the three elements of the Government's learning model. We go on to suggest that these constraints are resulting in learning that struggles to reach 'single loop' characteristics and certainly does not accord with the 'double loop' learning defined by Argyris and Schon (1978). As Chapter 1 explains, in the context of policy-making single loop learning involves identifying problems in the implementation stage in order to correct them. Double-loop learning, on the other hand, involves understanding the problems of the policy in its wider context and may lead to re-examining the parameters of the policy itself. The chapter concludes by proposing five ways in which the 'learning model' might be improved in order to maximize learning from local experience in the period leading to the scheduled review of A Levels in 2008.

### **14-19 best practice partnerships - policy learning or policy legitimization?**

An integral building block of the 'learning model' is the concept of the 'pathfinder'. Used as a tool of 'experimentation' across a range of services (e.g. education and training, Children's Services, Home Office, Defra and so on), pathfinders are a policy piloting strategy favoured by the Labour Government (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). They are not, however, pilots in the strictest sense – i.e. a means of implementing a policy within tightly controlled conditions and across a narrow range of institutions. Pathfinders are a more nebulous form of policy experimentation accorded several ambitious purposes – to develop 'best practice'; to provide a test-bed for policy initiatives; to reduce incidences of policy failure by providing swift feedback on the policy process prior to roll-out; to explore new solutions and to identify barriers to reform (Strategy Unit 2003).

Thus in relation to the development of 14-19 while the IFP also provided opportunities

for local innovation the 14-19 Pathfinders were particularly significant in the development of the phase because of their broad role across the age range and the wide-ranging changes which they were potentially able to address. The 14-19 Pathfinders were intended to:

- *“test out a range of ideas and discover new ones*
- *develop best practice in 14-19 education and training to guide the steps to, and pace of, a national roll-out*
- *see how 14-19 policy will fit with other policies, identify barriers to a coherent 14-19 phase and design ways to overcome them*
- *show that a coherent 14-19 phase can be achieved nationally in a variety of locations with different social circumstances and different mixes of schools and colleges”* (Higham *et al.* 2004: 7).

In analysing the role of best practice partnerships in contributing to practitioner and policy learning, we make a distinction between the ability of these partnerships to carry out their function within the current policy climate and the extent to which government actually utilises the evidence they produce.

In relation to the ability of best practice partnerships to fulfil their role within the learning model, evaluative research suggests that this is compromised by the way in which they are funded. Evaluators point to evidence of local innovation in the hothouse conditions experienced by the Pathfinders where committed practitioners have been brought together with relatively lavish resources. Positive outcomes include the development of more practical and diverse approaches to learning and lessons on how to create and sustain different patterns of institutional collaboration (Higham and Yeomans 2006). Despite these messages, however, the difficulty then has to be faced of scaling up this type of innovation elsewhere, when the very conditions that produced the success are absent in replication.

Moreover, while 14-19 Pathfinders have been relatively generously resourced, their funding remained highly competitive and precarious. There was little incentive, therefore,

for them to burden government with uncomfortable messages about barriers to innovation. In the competitive world of funding, it might be calculated that the best chance of securing future financing is to accentuate the positive and to place little emphasis on the inhibiting factors. Put another way – the best practice partnership function of trying to demonstrate the possible could actually undermine the desire for policy learning.

In addition, their precarious funding and the rapid nature of 14-19 policy-making means that these exemplars of innovation can come and go. They are often not in the position, therefore, to form sustainable networks of trust. Pathfinder evaluators sum up the transient nature of this aspect of ‘policy piloting’ in an era of policy busyness and initiative overload:

*“As the 14-19 Pathfinders initiative recedes into history and other developments in 14-19 come to the fore it will inevitably become more difficult to identify specific aspects which have been replicated since these will have become inextricably entangled with newer developments located in different contexts. Therefore to look for systemic effects from the programme may be neither feasible nor desirable”* (Higham and Yeomans 2006: 56).

Despite the high profile and investment in best practice partnerships the Government appears to have made limited use of them in terms of policy learning. These partnerships have been given some systemic functions insofar as they are intended to *identify barriers and show linkages between policies*. This is part of their role in reducing the possibility of gross policy failure and offering some sort of ‘insurance policy’ by providing feedback for policy-makers early in the implementation process (Strategy Unit 2003). But what do the best practice partnerships actually tell policy-makers and how are they used? The 14-19 White Paper made twelve references to the 14-19 Pathfinders and IFP. It reported that a great deal of innovation was taking place and concluded from this that the proposed policy framework could work (e.g. ‘autonomous’ institutions can collaborate). There were no other indications of what the Government had learned from the best practice

partnerships and there was certainly no discussion about barriers. This, it might be argued, could be because the main barriers frustrating change and improvement derive from the Government's own policies (e.g. the refusal to reform general qualifications; the encouragement of institutional competition; the absence of a coherent and stable 14-19 funding mechanism).

The learning role of the best practice partnerships is intimately tied up with Government approaches towards consultation processes; both are meant to inform policy. The 14-19 consultation process since the first 2002 Green Paper has, however, been fragmented rather than iterative. The 14-19 White Paper was published following evaluation reports of the first waves of Pathfinders and Increased Flexibility projects (Higham *et al.* 2004, Golden *et al.*, 2004, Golden *et al.*, 2005a) but before the publication of three further reports (Higham and Yeomans 2005, 2006, Golden *et al.*, 2005b). In fact, there was no clear line of evaluation or consultation between the Green Paper *Extending opportunities, raising standards* (DfES 2002) and the publication of the 14-19 White Paper in 2005. In its green paper response document *14-19: opportunity and excellence* (DfES 2003a), the Government admitted that the 2002 Green Paper lacked a coherent long-term vision. Spurred on by the A Level grading crisis of 2003, Ministers proposed the formation of the Tomlinson Working Group to map a future strategy. After toiling for 18 months, the central recommendation of the Working Group for 14-19 Reform, for a unified and inclusive diploma system (Working Group for 14-19 Reform 2004), was rejected by a new set of education Ministers in the run up to a general election. As Chapter 1 explains, the main force behind 14-19 strategy was not reflections on past policies or practice but the pressure of politics. By the time of *The 14-19 Implementation Plan*, the idea of 'learning' from best practice partnerships was confined entirely to practitioner learning and good practice transfer with no reference to national policy-makers or national policy learning.

As their name implies, best practice partnerships are also intended to develop and disseminate best practice as part of practitioner learning. The issue of practice transfer will be discussed in a later section on Learning Visits. There is, however, the problem of

the concept of ‘best practice’ itself. Originating in the private sector as a tool to benchmark performance against competitors, the concept of ‘best practice’ has entered popular parlance in the public sector as part of the Government’s agenda of driving up performance (Brannan *et al.* 2006). Seen as a subtler tool than targets and the accountability agenda, best practice describes a process in which innovation is stimulated, identified and then disseminated by central government, leading to widespread improvement (Newman *et al.* 2000). The concept also has the advantage of coinciding with the commonsense notion that it is both sensible and possible to learn in a relatively unproblematic way from those who are ‘getting it right’.

Newman and colleagues note, however, that best practice and innovation have been treated as synonymous, whereas they should be regarded as distinct. Innovation is new practice whereas *“best practice is the adoption of a new practice/policy through following some generally accepted view amongst practitioners of what is a state of the art approach”* (Brannan *et al.* 2006: 3). It should also be noted that while both innovation and the adoption of best practice inevitably incorporate key values concerning policy and practice, these tend to be somewhat opaque in accounts of best practice, since the criteria that initially led to the selection of particular practices are often not clearly explicated.

Furthermore, the research by Brannen *et al* confirms the findings of Fielding and colleagues (2005) who found that concepts of ‘best practice’ are more effectively communicated laterally through ‘networks of trust’ and that dissemination from central government through best practice manuals has proved somewhat less useful. The Government, however, still relies heavily on good/best practice manuals as a means of dissemination. Commenting on this, the authors of the most recent Pathfinder evaluation (Higham and Yeomans 2006) point to the DfES 14-19 Gateway website with its section on good practice which details the Learning Visits and Good Practice Manual together with case-studies and video clips, based on the practice in 14-19 Pathfinders. The evaluators go on to remark, however, that they have no evidence of how many people have used these resources and in what way.

In concluding this analysis of best practice partnerships and their contribution to the learning model, we highlight the limitations of this ‘rational’ model. Best practice partnerships are part of the rational model of a ‘what works’ approach to policy-making – the idea of trialling and piloting and then disseminating in order to bring about implementation on a larger scale.

As we have seen, however, the ‘rational’ aspect of the model is weakened by three major problems. First, policy learning is affected by the politicization of policy-making - set policy agendas which have rejected the professional voice; politically determined timetables and an unwillingness, at least at this point, to question the effects of key policy levers and drivers that mould institutional behaviour. The ‘rational’ model of policy-making is meant to be procedural (i.e. waiting for evidence from piloting before rolling out national programmes). However, the Government’s preoccupation with political considerations encourages it continually to break these rules.

The second problem is that the best practice partnerships have been unable to pilot policies in optimum conditions because they are being asked to experiment with half-finished reforms (e.g. they have to simulate the implementation of Specialised Diplomas when their design has not yet been agreed) and they do not have significant control over the policy factors that drive institutional behaviour or the take-up of qualifications.

The third problem arises from assumptions about practitioner and institutional learning. Best practice partnerships are part of what can be termed ‘elite teaching’ – more innovative institutions teach less innovative ones. This has become an increasingly ubiquitous feature of government policy as represented by the establishment, for example, of specialist schools, beacon schools, CoVEs and leading edge partnerships. Despite the ubiquity of this elite practitioner and institutional ‘teaching’ model there is little evidence that a great deal of progress has been made in conceptualising and then implementing the ways in which best practice can be transferred and learning can take

place. Recent research (e.g. Fielding *et al.* 2005, Higham and Yeomans 2006) suggests that this is not the most effective way of organizing practitioner learning because of the lack of ownership, the risk of mechanical borrowing and the inability to reproduce the conditions under which ‘best practice’ emerged on a wider scale. We expand on this issue in the next section.

While the best practice partnership concept has its merits as a source of local innovation we argue that it suffers from the effects of the wider politicized policy landscape. Moreover, the partnership experience accords with findings from policy and practice transfer in local regeneration programmes where it was also recognized that pathfinder-type initiatives tend to function more as a source of policy legitimation than as a means of policy learning or analysis (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2000). Their experience too begs the question of whether best practice partnerships can, indeed, pave the way for others or whether everyone has to find their own way by reflecting upon their unique as well as their shared conditions.

## **Learning Visits**

As a related element of the best practice partnership concept, the DfES programme of Learning Visits, represents “*a mechanism for enabling everyone to learn from the areas that have made the most progress*” (DfES 2005b: 9). Ten best practice partnerships (seven involved in 14-19 Pathfinders and three in IFP) presently offer Learning Visits to 14-19 partnerships across the country. Visits last a day though, in theory at least, there are opportunities for longer-term relationships between schools and colleges.

In addition, it is proposed to establish four types of networks to support 14-19 White Paper developments:

- networks to support learning transfer from the learning visits;
- networks linking schools, colleges and the Diploma Development Partnerships that

- are currently designing the 14 lines of the proposed Specialised Diplomas;
- sector-wide networks of Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVEs) and the newly establishes Skills Academies to promote quality vocational provision within the diplomas;
  - regional networks of ‘subject coaches’ to “ensure the adoption of good practice” (DfES 2005: 67)

The Government has also funded the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) to run a ‘14-19 Programme of Support for Delivery of Change on the Ground’. This is designed to provide *‘schools and colleges with the help they need to deliver the type of broad and flexible curriculum that features in the ‘14-19 Education and Skills White Paper’ and the resulting 14-19 Education and Skills Implementation Plan’* (LSN 2006). This help is provided through consultancies, materials and workshops.

According to the ‘timeline for reform’ (DfES 2005b: 23), it is intended that the Learning Visits, networks and LSN support programme will facilitate preparation and disseminate good practice in time for the first wave of Specialised Diplomas in 2008.

The Government is undoubtedly committed to enabling practitioner learning from local practice within the framework of established policy. Moreover, the programme of Learning Visits is underway and is proving popular with groups of practitioners. The question is not whether learning is taking place, but whether the learning model will prove effective in establishing improvements in 14-19 learning, provision and policy. In terms of evidence, it is simply too early to make a judgement. However, the assumptions of the Government’s model can be tested against recent research on the transfer of good practice (Fielding *et al.* 2005) and on the experience of 14-19 Pathfinders (Higham and Yeomans 2006).

Research based on wide-ranging evidence (i.e. interviews with 120 practitioners who have tried good practice transfer; data from over 30 beacon institutions, recipients of best practice scholarships and the outcomes of seminars to discuss interim findings), Fielding

and colleagues from the University of Sussex and Demos arrived at the conclusions summarized in the first column of Figure 1. These are compared with features and conditions within the Government’s 14-19 good practice learning model listed in the second column.

*Figure 1. Transferring and learning from good practice*

<b>Factors influencing the transfer of good practice</b>	<b>Government’s 14-19 good practice learning model</b>
Joint practice development rather than practice transfer	Practice transfer focused
Development and continuity of trust relationships built on previous experience	New and possibly temporary learning relationships based around the Learning Visits
Learners are engaged due to involvement in joint planning of the learning	Learners are the recipients of ‘good practice’
Understanding time and addressing the issue of lack of time	Politically inspired deadlines (e.g. 2008 for the introduction of the first five Specialised Diplomas and all to be introduced by 2010) which leave little time for consultation or policy learning
Positive teacher and institutional identity through a ‘non-badging’ approach	Potential for labelling institutions as ‘advanced’ and ‘less advanced’
Supportive structures for transfer – time, communication, funding and technology	Limitations in all of these
Challenges of evaluation and seeing whether good practice transfer actually takes place	Too early to tell but tradition of evaluation established through 14-19 Pathfinders and ILP

The main difference between the joint practice development advocated by the research findings and government-sponsored practice transfer is one of mutual engagement and time. Learning Visits are based on hierarchical, temporary and time-constrained learning relationships rather than on mutually supportive relationships fostered over time.

The differences can also be conceptualised in terms of the distinctions between ‘acquisitive’ and ‘participatory’ learning made by Sfard (1998) and modified by Hager (2005) through the addition of ‘constructivist’ learning. While these positions conflate important distinctions and complexities concerning learning (McGuinness, 2005) they

can be used to examine dominant assumptions within learning programmes. Figure 1 shows how Fielding *et al* emphasised the participatory character of learning through their emphasis on joint practice development and the joint planning of learning. In contrast, the emerging 14-19 learning model privileges the acquisitive model through the Learning Visits as well as other aspects of the support provided, such as the manual of good practice and other on-line or printed materials. Recipients are envisaged as essentially soaking up information about 14-19 best practice which it is assumed can then be applied relatively unproblematically in their own contexts.

This characterisation of the dominant model of learning embodied in the 14-19 learning model was confirmed in the case of one particular Learning Visit to a best practice partnership, which comprised a Powerpoint slideshow of no less than 67 slides delivered over a five-hour period. The recipients would certainly have gone away somewhat awestruck by the accomplishments of the innovating institutions. However, how much they would have taken away to transfer to their own context is less clear. The question of ‘practice transfer’ was simply not on the agenda, it was assumed.

This is not to say that some participatory and constructivist learning may not have taken place both during and after Learning Visits. Nor is it to suggest that acquisitive learning is inherently inferior to other types of learning. However, we do suggest that a learning programme based predominantly on a view of learning as acquisition is not appropriate for supporting the establishment of partnerships where deep, grounded contextual understandings of local circumstances are essential and, therefore, where participatory and constructivist learning needs to be prevalent.

Moreover, research evidence on partnership building emphasises the importance of time in developing trust, shared understandings and appropriate structures (Hudson and Hardy 2002). Participatory and constructivist support for these processes is likely to be labour intensive, since it needs to be carefully tailored to particular local contexts. There are elements of such customised support with the 14-19 learning model but the overall emphasis is upon a set menu. The effectiveness of Learning Visits will depend not only

on the quality of the visit experience itself, which will in turn be influenced by implicit models of learning, but also on factors related to those who want to learn. Learning Visits, by their very nature, are fleeting and compressed learning experiences.

The DfES has stated that it would like to see a follow-up process to the Learning Visits but it is difficult to see how a limited number of busy best practice partnerships will have the time to consolidate multiple learning relationships within the time constraints under which they are forced to operate.

The effectiveness of practice transfer, as the research illustrates, depends on a wider range of factors. In addition to those listed in the Fielding *et al.* research, our consultancy work with 14-19 partnerships suggests that factors affecting practitioner learning include the degree of cohesion of the partnership seeking advice and how far it has clarified its aims and questions. Many partnerships are at an early stage of development and may, from our observations, be simply casting around to learn ‘randomly’ rather than seeking concrete solutions to help them progress in a particular area or solve an identified problem. This tendency may be exacerbated when partnerships have come into being to meet the demands of national policy or to gain access to particular funding streams rather than growing out of shared understandings of local needs and aspirations.

In addition and crucially, 14-19 partnerships are seeking solutions to problems that cannot be solved by examining the practice of others, because the issues that exercise everyone most (e.g. the nature of qualifications and assessment, institutional competition, performance measures and funding instability) emanate from policy itself and the role of key policy levers and drivers beyond the immediate control of even the most innovative 14-19 partnerships.

Reflection so far on the limitations of the Government’s Learning Model, involving 14-19 best practice partnerships and Learning Visits, points to the important role of all 14-19 partnerships, their cohesion, their capacity to learn from their own experiences as well the experiences of others and their ability to exercise some local control over external

national policy levers and drivers that mould institutional behaviour.

### **14-19 partnerships – learning within weakly collaborative arrangements**

The third element of the Government's learning model is the idea of institutional collaboration and partnership to stimulate and replicate good practice. Partnership has become a key element of government social policy (e.g. Glendinning *et al.* 2002, Balloch & Taylor 2002) and has become increasingly ubiquitous within education and training policy, for example in relationship to networked learning projects (e.g. Kerr *et al.* 2003), professional learning communities (e.g. Bolam *et al.* 2005) and Education Improvement Partnerships (DfES, 2005). The importance of partnership working has been further emphasised with the adoption of the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES 2003b) with its focus on multi-agency working.

14-19 institutional collaboration has become a policy priority because the Government realises that the offer of a local entitlement, including all 14 lines of Specialised Diplomas cannot be effectively delivered by a single institution. Schools, colleges and work-based learning providers are being 'expected' to form and to further develop local 14-19 partnerships on an area basis (DfES, 2005b). Furthermore, it will not be possible for institutions to pass through the Specialised Diploma Gateway and thus offer the diplomas unless they can demonstrate that they '*are working together, with firm collaboration arrangements in place*' (DfES, 2006, 16). While this insistence upon the establishment of partnerships demonstrates the importance which the Government attaches to it, there is something distinctly odd about *ordering* institutions to form partnerships. Of course, in many localities institutions may not need to be ordered to collaborate, while elsewhere the Government may be pushing at an open or unlocked door. However, the approach does also risk the possibility of promoting contrived collegiality (see Hargreaves, 1994) in which collaboration is simulated in order to obtain funding or pass through the Specialised Diploma Gateway.

At the same time, however, the Government still believes in market mechanisms for

driving up the standard of provision and so promotes contestability of provision and institutional competition through the introduction of new sixth forms, academies and skills centres (DfES 2004).

14-19 collaborative arrangements are, therefore, being developed in a policy climate that has an acute balance of enabling and inhibiting features. On the positive side, Pathfinder evaluations (e.g. Higham and Yeomans 2005) suggest that factors assisting collaboration and, thereby, producing a potential climate for learning are - a history of collaboration in the locality, shared aims and objectives, strong local leadership, access to additional funding and an absence of hierarchy between participating institutions. Many of these factors concern the internal dynamics of partnership arrangements, though these can vary considerably between partnerships and are susceptible to change and disruption.

Balanced against these are powerful external inhibiting factors - unreformed general qualifications, institutional competition and performance measures that weaken collaboration (Hodgson and Spours 2006). Government policy, which has left GCSEs and A Levels relatively unchanged and which encourages the establishment of new sixth forms, risks being interpreted by selective and academically high performing schools as a message that they can have a minimal involvement in what looks like a 14-19 vocational reform agenda. On the other hand, those institutions that do identify with the vocational emphasis of *The 14-19 Implementation Plan*, but are pressurized by performance tables and the need to improve their GCSE 5A\*-C grades, can make decisions which also frustrate genuine collaboration. For example, schools may decide unilaterally to offer a range of 'weakly vocational' subjects such as business, IT and leisure and tourism qualifications (equivalent to two and four GCSEs) to boost their GCSE points scores while, at the same time, deciding to decant their most disaffected learners into link schemes with colleges. Moreover, in a climate in which institutional commitment to collaboration can be equivocal, organizational complexities, such as common timetabling, may exercise an additional deterrent effect.

Government, however, appears to have little understanding of the relationship between

external policy levers and drivers, this kind of institutional decision-making and how it affects practitioner and policy learning, despite its continued reliance on these mechanisms as the preferred mode of governance within the Learning and Skills Sector (Steer *et al.* 2006). Research on 14-19 collaboration over the last two years (Hayward *et al.* 2005) suggests that the capacity for 14-19 partnerships to learn from their experience depends not only on their ability to reflect on issues of practice but also on their capacity to understand and to be able to act upon aspects of national policy that currently constrain innovation.

At this stage in the policy process, enabling factors for institutional collaboration appear to be largely related to the internal dynamics of a partnership and the inhibiting factors appear to be mainly external. Our assessment is that external factors are more powerful than internal ones and it is this adverse balance that renders 14-19 partnerships ‘weakly collaborative’ (Hayward *et al.* 2005). An important question will be the power exercised by the statutory nature of the 14-19 Entitlement and the role of Specialised Diploma Gateway that will only allow institutions to offer the first wave of Specialised Diplomas if there is evidence of area-wide collaboration. These two measures may, indeed, have a regulatory effect on those wanting to be involved, but may have little power to affect decision-making in those institutions that do not identify with 14-19 vocational provision. The entitlement, which focuses heavily on the vocational Specialised Diplomas, could end up codifying an institutional academic/vocational divide.

Elsewhere, we have argued that this Government has made ‘half-right’ policy assumptions about learners and their learning (Hodgson *et al.* 2006). The same assessment could equally be applied to their assumptions about practitioner learning and policy learning from local experience. The Government is probably largely correct in assuming that practitioners want to learn from one another, but the most effective learning appears to take place through sustained, open and strong learning relationships rather than through time-constrained Learning Visits and Best Practice Manuals. The Government is also correct in assuming that trialling, experimentation and piloting can assist in policy development, but it seems unable to facilitate these activities in any

meaningful way in the 14-19 phase due to its rushed and politically informed reform agenda.

### **Improving practitioner and policy learning in the wider policy process**

Despite the aims of the three-dimensional 14-19 Learning Model to improve both practice and policy, Ministers seem far more committed to fostering practitioner learning, in what they see as the implementation phase of 14-19 reform, than to national policy learning from local experience. Moreover, while the DfES may be putting in place structures for practitioner learning, the rapidity of the policy process prevents this from happening effectively. Seen through the lens of single and double loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1978), the Government sees a role for single loop learning to provide ‘corrections’ in the 14-19 implementation phase. On the other hand, it appears to have little or no commitment to double loop learning that would pose challenges to the parameters of policy. The experience of its learning model to date suggests that single loop learning will be an achievement. With consultations on Specialised Diplomas lasting days rather than months (e.g. the consultation on Level 1 Specialised Diploma models had a 48 hour reply window); with the new wave of best practice partnerships being asked to trial unfinished qualification designs and 14-19 partnerships being asked to sign up to the Specialised Diploma Gateway before they know what the new qualifications involve, we may even be looking at ‘half-loop’ learning.

The limitations of the prevailing model provide clues as to what is required to promote more effective practice and policy learning from local experience and innovation. Five key areas of required action emerge from the chapter analysis:

1. It will be important to slow down the reform process so that the fundamental building blocks of 14-19 reform can be modelled, created, discussed and piloted in order to ‘grind out’ design mistakes. This more deliberative process did not take place under *Curriculum 2000* and there is every chance that the same mistakes could be repeated with the Specialised Diplomas. Moreover, a longer

and more deliberative approach is particularly warranted in the case of the Specialised Diplomas because of the untested way in which these qualifications have been designed. The need for a longer learning process is more pressing because of the relative inexperience of the diploma designers. Diploma Development Partnerships, led by the newly formed Sector Skills Councils, have been put firmly in the driving seat while a back-seat role has been allocated to more experienced and expert organizations such as QCA and the awarding bodies.

2. Longer implementation timescales are also needed to provide a framework for the creation of sustainable mutual learning networks and partnerships to exchange innovative practice in the way that research suggests is likely to be effective. More time for reform would also provide the space for effective single loop learning.
3. Double loop learning will be the key to more effective practitioner learning from local practice. 14-19 partnerships need to exercise some control over the policy parameters that affect innovation. Key to this, for example, will be their ability to set up area-wide accountability measures to encourage more collective institutional behaviour and to broaden the scope of collaboration. *The 14-19 Implementation Plan* states that there will be adjustments to accountability mechanisms in 2007, but it is not clear whether the Government is prepared to go as far as promoting policy levers and drivers that will significantly strengthen institutional collaboration over competition.
4. The Government needs to show a greater commitment to national policy learning from local innovation rather than being content with practice transfer. This means creating more effective fora for policy feedback. Presently, this appears to be a somewhat random activity confined to selected groups of practitioners and policy-makers, some of whom are constrained by dependence on funding. There is no systematic wider process of feedback because Ministers and senior civil servants are reluctant to re-engage in debates about the Tomlinson reform proposals, yet

these curriculum and qualification issues are crucial because of the level of support for a more unified approach to 14-19 reform. The absence of this kind of dialogue is leading to a significant ‘narrative gap’ between the most active and innovative members of the profession and national policy-makers.

5. The Government will need to show, at a minimum, tolerance of the variations of pace and direction of development that will be the inevitable consequences of enabling greater local innovation. This tolerance will need to be reflected in the operation of national policy levers and regulations. More positively, the Government may wish actively to celebrate such variations and defend divergencies of practice across different 14-19 partnerships. There are clearly issues around the degrees and forms of variation that might be considered acceptable. As we noted early in this chapter, some critics asserted that the variations were too wide in the earlier era of localism. One of the functions of the double-loop policy learning advocated above is that it would provide a basis upon which debates involving national and local policy makers and practitioners about degrees of acceptable variation could be conducted.

Stepping back, it seems clear that learning from local experience involves not only providing the conditions for practitioner learning but also a deep-seated commitment to deliberative and collaborative policy learning in the broader sense. The local and national are inextricably linked in the policy process. Practitioners have historically provided a rich source of innovation within the English education and training system and the construction of the 14-19 phase has invited them, once again, to play a part. To date, however, the Government’s Learning Model is encouraging only ‘restricted’ and ‘half-loop’ learning, whereas, with more professional trust and less politics, it could be facilitating a far more effective learning process.

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