Shared Services in adult learning

157 group — Furthering Education & Skills	HOLEX	niace — 90 years of promoting adult learning	tsnla

Bulletin 5	**June 2013**

In our fourth bulletin (issued in March 2013) we were able to report on the learning from the interim and final reports of all funded projects in the first phase of the Adult Learning Shared Services programme. This bulletin now mainly focuses on work under a continuation phase.

Roundup of Phase One

We found from first phase projects that, on balance, it does look as if adult learning providers see joint working as a way of helping them do more and better things with their money, rather than as a way of securing efficiency gains.

All adult learning project activities have painted a clear picture of how, for local authority and third sector providers, a combination of the political context, the funding environment, the community base and the historical rootedness in a needs-based adult learning approach have contributed to an attitude to collaboration which seems distinct from that amongst sector colleges. This arguably includes, but is not restricted to, possibly less emphasis on seeking collaboration for primarily financial reasons and more on improving community reach, extending curriculum responsiveness and enhancing quality. The Steering Group attaches high importance to the demonstration of impact of shared services work, and to sustainability planning: this is evident from the reports received from all funded projects, which contain clear lessons for the wider sector and which were summarised in Bulletin 4.

Continuation Phase activity

In the fourth bulletin we also announced that the Adult Learning Shared Services Steering Group had agreed to initiate three strands of continuation activity. A

description of these workstreams, and findings to date, is given in summary form below; full details will be reported in the dissemination phase, planned to start in July.

Strand 1 - Barriers to collaboration and how to address them: to revisit the 40+ examples of informal collaboration identified in our initial mapping exercise, to check on progress and to draw out further lessons which might be of use to the wider sector

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This workstream has identified that the barriers to collaboration can loom very large. In a climate where providers are finding they need to prioritise fairly stringently in order to get everything essential done, managers tell us that collaborative ventures which are not compulsory often run the risk of being 'put on the back burner'. Several providers have said that for this reason they have aimed to build collaborative projects into their agreed plans and targets for the year, so that collaborative work is not fitted in at the last minute, or overlooked altogether.

Several providers who said they were 'forced' to collaborate originally because of SFA policy on Minimum Contract Levels have reported that, whilst the compulsory nature of the collaboration was stressful at the outset, it has led to useful joint working, particularly with regard to shared staff training and shared improvement resources, including approaches to the observation of teaching and learning, and adoption of common approaches to self-assessment, now seen more as a process than a one-off annual exercise to produce a SAR. Others have said that collaboration of this kind has deprived them of their independence, and that they would prefer if SFA could recognise and fund collaborative partnerships rather than focus on a 'lead provider' model.

Providers have said that lack of honesty and transparency (about finance, capacity etc) from some partners had been the biggest barrier to success, and most providers have stressed these as essential ingredients to any successful partnership. As one third sector provider has told us, 'It's all about relationships and knowing your data." Collaboration had in one case led to delivery of substantial provision for no income, "because of how the partnership had to operate": this suggests that service level agreements, and supply chain guidance governing collaborative delivery, could benefit from review.

Further examples of barriers to collaboration have been described as problems in deciding who should 'lead'; problems with 'due diligence' procedures being seen as intrusive by some; and not having a shared ethos. Most providers conclude that a shared ethos, enshrined in a service level agreement which sets out policies and procedures and helps to build trust, is the key way to address these and other key 'blockers' to effective collaborative working.

Strand 2 - Specialist designated institutions (SDIs) as established models of collaborative working: to work with London-based specialist designated institutions, to learn from their experience

This workstream involves City Lit, Working Men's College, the Mary Ward Centre and Morley College. Each is reporting in detail about their strategic approach to collaboration - how they go about it, the history of their collaborative activities and what they currently do in collaboration with others, focusing on both the intent behind a partnership, and its impacts. They are all also reporting on the role of Governors in stimulating and developing collaborative activity. Interim reports indicate that each of the SDIs has a unique approach which is influenced by the individual history of the institution: they all differ in their target audiences and community profile. But they share several aspects in common – namely a very strong strategic commitment to working in partnership with other organisations for very specific reasons. In one case, collaboration is classified as:

- primarily to widen participation
- primarily to benefit our learners
- primarily for income
- primarily for reputational gain
- primarily to improve quality

all underpinned by the aim of raising awareness:

> "*Everything you do outside the institution raises awareness. So, as long as your contribution to collaborative activities is of a high quality, it works as free advertising for your main offer. On some of our programmes, for example Family Learning, one of our main aims is to support learners to progress into mainstream education, so it is no surprise that many of those students subsequently come to study with us. But this also occurs in many cases where progression isn't the intended goal. It would be overstating the case to say that [our] steady growth in student numbers and fees stems entirely from community engagement, but it's certainly a big help.*"

Each SDI is producing a number of short case studies as part of their report, which will illustrate how their collaborative activity achieves its goals. All will be meeting with the project director so that common and distinctive aspects of their individual reports can be identified and discussed, and incorporated into a short overview report. All the material from this very in-depth look at these four collaboration hubs will be disseminated online with the other adult learning shared service materials.

Strand 3 - The pros and cons of third sector consortia: to undertake an assessment of the benefits to be gained from third sector consortium working, and using this evidence to explore options for the development of new, formalised third sector partnership arrangements

This workstream focuses on one geographical area where there is no directly contracted third sector learning consortium, and compares the position there with a region which does have an active third sector consortium in receipt of SFA (and EFA) funding. As well as the research, we have aimed to stimulate activity towards the development of new collaborations through demonstrating the potential benefits and steps to be taken to achieve these, and sharing these in an invitation workshop which aimed to stimulate the formation of greater joint working between third sector agencies. We have been mindful throughout this work that the options for collaboration are broad, and include continuation/possible extension of existing sub-contracting relationships, formation of a single regional consortium or (more likely to be popular, perhaps) further evolution of smaller, sub-regional collaborative ventures.

Work on this strand complements existing funded activity being undertaken by the Third Sector National Learning Alliance, which is looking at efficiency and effectiveness in existing third sector shared services. Our work has also been brought to the attention of the newly-formed Third Sector Strategy Implementation Board, which has identified effective third sector partnership working as a key development priority. Looking at the pros and cons of collaboration and consortium formation is a particularly relevant endeavour in the current context:

- SFA, as party to previous LSIS-managed research into the contribution made by the third sector to learning and skills, and as a member of the Third Sector Strategy Implementation Board, is known to be considering ways in which such provision might be procured more readily, without compromising the Agency's exposure to risk

- skills funding may well in time pass to LEPs, in which case it will be incumbent on all skills providers to reflect a common and collaboratively achieved view on local skills priorities, and co-ordinated delivery against these priorities

- the Community Learning Trust agenda, when rolled out following the pilots of 2012/13, will also require providers to take a collaborative approach to planning and delivery

- the OFSTED improvement agenda, new CIF and short-notice inspection regime may place pressure on third sector providers, particularly smaller agencies, to get together to pool tools, materials and resources for quality assurance and improvement, if not delivery as well.

Research under this strand initially focused mainly on Community Learning provision, although most third sector providers contacted also talked about provision supported by the Adult Skills Budget, for the Work Programme and in response to European initiatives, and contacts discussed existing collaborations with local authorities, other third sector providers and with FE sector colleges. Interim conclusions suggest that the existence of large third sector main contractors, working overtly as consortia and with a strong strategic aim to develop and support their sub-contractor partners, does indeed make a difference both in terms of volume and quality. We are continuing to explore why such an arrangement is not adopted by the third sector in all parts of the country: further work needs to be done to identify the significant differences between the third sectors in the two regions currently being studied, and indeed any distinctive geographic, economic or demographic features.

What we have been able to focus on more readily in this small-scale research is, empirically, what third sector organisations think about collaboration, and how they generalise from their past experience and perceptions of collaboration. Themes identified to date indicate that a lack of evidence on and role modelling of how a successful third sector consortium works can be a key determinant. We have received a fair amount of negative feedback about third sector collaborations with FE colleges, and how past experience has often been taken as a reason to withdraw from joint working, and/or to pre-empt any future attempts to work together. Organisations simply do not seem to have seen a successful consortium working well to the benefit of providers and of the client groups they prioritise. This is in stark contrast to an area where there is a third sector consortium in place – the lead agency there works successfully with over 45 third sector sub-contractors, who clearly see an advantage for themselves and for learners in this arrangement. Put simply, if not convinced of the benefits of working in formal partnership, third sector organisations will not do so.

In order to stimulate further potential collaboration within the third sector, preliminary findings from this strand of work suggest a number of useful ways forward, including:

- outlining in more detail the benefits experienced where third sector consortia have been in operation for some time, perhaps drawing on a wider sample

- undertaking further consultation about the pros and cons of consortium formation and other approaches to third sector partnership arrangements

- disseminating the findings from this work widely

- facilitating some ongoing networking between third sector agencies, probably on theme-specific issues

- initiating some small-scale action research with third sector providers in a region where no consortium currently exists.

The aim of this work would be to refine and model how collaboration could be stimulated in third sector organisations. Some of this activity lies beyond the scope of the current enquiry.

Dissemination

We plan to mount a dissemination phase for the adult learning shared services programme as a whole. Materials are currently being prepared for this, and will include an internet-based bank of key local working documents and project reports as a resource for providers in the local authority and third sectors who want to find new ways to work together in today's challenging environment.

A Shared Services internet portal hosted by 157 Group will incorporate materials from the all phases of the adult learning initiative, alongside other related resources, and will be launched in summer 2013: information on how to access those materials will be included in the sixth and final bulletin.

Membership of the Adult Learning Shared Services Steering Group comprises Tim Ward (Chair), from the Third Sector National Learning Alliance (tim@learningcurve.org.uk); Christine Doubleday from 157 Group (christine.doubleday@157group.co.uk); Ian Yarroll from NIACE (ian.yarroll@niace.org.uk); and Bob Powell from HOLEX (holexbp@ail.com). Research activity, project co-ordination and Steering Group support is provided by Miranda Seymour-Smith, working through the HOLEX National Office.

If you would like further information on the Adult Learning Shared Services programme, or wish to notify us of collaborative work you already have underway or are planning, please contact the HOLEX National Office in the first instance: e-mail holexbp@aol.com or telephone 01386 443550.