

The learning and skills sector and the economic crisis – stepping up to the mark

Report of the seminar series held May to July 2009

LSIS LEARNING
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IMPROVEMENT
SERVICE



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Foreword



This report captures discussion and inputs to a series of three policy seminars held between May and July 2009 to consider how the learning and skills sector can best contribute to the national effort to combat recession and prepare for the upturn.

We considered the range of strategies from different government departments and we explored how providers can shape these into effective strategies at the organisational level and the challenges they face in doing so. We hope that the report will be of use to sector leaders in considering how they can respond in the economic priorities in their localities.

LSIS policy seminars aim to provide a forum for sector leaders to talk through and make sense of immediate and emerging policy developments facing the sector. We hope that they provide space for reflection and contribute to the development of shared narratives around sector ambitions and priorities, and that they support leaders in shaping their organisational strategies. The seminars involve leaders from across the learning and skills sector to foster greater awareness of the distinctive perspectives and priorities faced, while also identifying common concerns and agendas.

We are always concerned to know if our publications are useful and whether and how you use them individually or with others in your organisation, and whether they influence your thinking or practice in any small or significant way. Please do give me any feedback that can assist us to shape our services to meet your needs more effectively.

Dr David Collins CBE

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'D' and 'C' followed by several horizontal strokes.

Chief Executive
Learning and Skills Improvement Service

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Please note:

This report features details such as job titles and organisation names that were correct at the time of the seminars, details may have since changed, for example, the change in government departments.

Executive summary

1. To play a full part in responding to the recession, sector colleges and providers need to be able to work collaboratively with other public and private sector bodies in delivering local strategies, for example, to address worklessness and economic development. Really effective and efficient delivery can only be achieved through collaborative strategic action in the locality.
2. Sector leaders report that their efforts are often inhibited by:
 - lack of flexibility of funding streams;
 - the degree of prescription related to targets;
 - proliferation at the local level of discrete funding streams from different government departments with their own accountability requirements that are difficult to knit together to achieve efficiencies of scale; and
 - accountability arrangements that point vertically towards Whitehall rather than horizontally to their communities, customers and citizens.
3. Innovative and determined leadership behaviours can overcome these inhibitors and generate positive outcomes. We described these leaders as *'creative and agile knitters'* – people able to make sense of options, build relationships, and create coherent strategies, to achieve innovative outcomes. However this frequently requires levels of ingenuity and creativity that might more usefully be directed towards improving responsiveness and delivery of outcomes, rather than circumventing existing systems.
4. We noted therefore that as well as improving the professionalism of public servants – the major focus of public service reform over the last decade or so – there is a need for improvements in the systems within which we operate. For optimum performance, systems as well as capacities and behaviours need to be effective.
5. Our discussions indicated that in order to maximise the contribution of sector colleges and providers to combating the recession and preparing for the upturn, the systems need to be improved, for example, as follows:
 - colleges and providers need greater scope for horizontal accountability towards their local communities, customers and citizens to enable greater joint strategic action within a coalition of public services – this is being explored through the Total Place pilots and LSIS is supporting colleges to engage in these; and
 - funding should be linked to performance measures which are defined in terms of broader policy outcomes rather than highly-specified numerical targets.
6. So let us hear it for the *'creative and agile knitters'* as they are an essential ingredient to enable an effective sector response in the short-term.

Main report

Introduction

7. This report summarises discussions held and presentations given at the LSIS summer 2009 seminar series, The learning and skills sector and the economic crisis – stepping up to the mark. As part of its role in developing and advising the sector, LSIS organised this seminar series to examine how the recession will affect the sector, how learning and skills providers can best respond to it and how the sector should plan for the post-recession environment.
8. Over the course of three seminars, involving leaders and opinion formers in the learning and skills sector, government departments and agencies, the seminars aimed to:
 - develop a shared strategy, narrative and determination among sector leaders, key stakeholders and government to address the skills and employability demands of the recession;
 - mobilise the contribution of the learning and skills sector as a critical and innovative force in responding to the current economic crisis; and
 - marshal the expertise of learning and skills providers to inform strategies through and beyond the recession, maintaining and promoting social cohesion and ensuring preparedness for the upturn and new economic conditions.
9. In part one, the discussion is summarised under the major themes that emerged across the seminar series. Part two provides summaries of the presentations by the keynote speakers (see page 16 for a full list of speakers). Finally a full list of seminar participants is provided at the end of the report in part three (page 44).

Part one – Key themes from discussion

Creative and agile knitters creating coherence

10. The recession has fundamentally changed the context in which we work. There is no established route map that can help us to navigate with certainty through and beyond the recession. There is significant pressure on all public service professionals to be seen to act to support the national effort. However, we need to act as strategically as possible, on the basis of clear priorities and best available evidence of where long-term impact will be greatest.
11. The term '*creative and agile knitter*' was coined to express the idea that we need people who can create coherent responses out of the range of options they face, whether developing a curriculum for recently unemployed people, or making strategic decisions at institutional level, or indeed at the level of national government policy. Coherence at the top of the system can reduce the level of ingenuity needed in the locality, but even with a clear and coherent national strategy, professionals need the headroom to be proactive in shaping and crafting responses to their particular and local reality.
12. Currently the government's anti-recession policies¹ are delivered through various agencies at the local, regional and national level, resulting in multiple programmes which often appear to be competing. The result can be confusion and wasted effort by providers, as programmes target the same groups of jobless or disadvantaged people. At the same time, some programmes that are designed and administered nationally or regionally are often not well-suited to local needs. For example, we heard that seven out of Greater Manchester's 10 local authorities compete with Jobcentre Plus and the LSC by offering their own unemployment programmes, because they do not feel the national-level programmes will solve local labour market problems.
13. Coherence at the local level could be assisted by a more integrated strategy at national level across ministries, avoiding proliferation of initiatives and budgets. However, the '*stove-pipe*' phenomenon that operates in the central government is unhelpful here. Ministers are held to account for '*their*' departments, not for the government as a whole² (except, perhaps, for the Prime Minister). This means that there is no coherent political strategy across government. Equally, incentives for civil servants to develop and prioritise cross-departmental strategy are not strong.
14. The creation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), and the placing of skills and HE under its common umbrella, may thus be a good thing, encouraging more joined-up policy between business, learning and skills, HE and other agencies. In a related vein, seminar participants suggested that learning and skills providers should map how their work could contribute across the range of the government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets.

1 For information on the recession and relevant government strategies see FE and the recession – the evolving story here: <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/FEandRecessiontheEvolvingStory.sflb>. This report is regularly updated and draws together information on relevant policies and developments.

2 However it should be noted that a number of ministers have cross-departmental responsibilities in the last reshuffle in June 2009. For example, Rosie Winterton works to both CLG and BIS; Kevin Brennan works to BIS and DCSF.

Increasing autonomy and strategic capacity in the locality

15. Central government cannot run everything by itself. Even Tony Blair admitted as much, saying that the initiatives he launched ‘*turned to mush*’ before they got to the front line, because he could not effectively monitor their implementation across the country from Number 10. No policy can be effectively implemented without competent, autonomous professionals at the front line. This is clearly true when it comes to responding to a rapidly unfolding recession which demands rapid responses on the ground.
16. The government’s capacity to predict the future shape of the economy is important but limited, as illustrated by the current recession. Where economic policy is clear, such as the expansion of nuclear power and investment in green technologies, future skills can be predicted and government can plan and invest to develop appropriate skills ahead of demand. But even then, systems can fail: for example, one college had invested in facilities for training people for this new type of green technology business, but found that the qualifications did not yet exist and so the LSC would not fund the provision.
17. We need to mobilise intelligent action at every level of our organisations and of the system. We need to be able to gather intelligence at many different levels in order to create a rich understanding of what is happening in the economy nationally, regionally and locally, including labour market trends. While there is a clear place for national and sectoral analysis, that must also be fed by the reality of the local and regional economy which can provide real-time intelligence without the lag often associated with data sets. FE providers can form part of a highly-sensitive *autonomic nervous system* that transmits data between the centre and the outlying areas that are in direct contact with the wider world and which allows differentiated responses at appropriate locations, not just those orchestrated and designed from the centre.
18. To collect this data, and to devise meaningful ways of acting on it, we must extend the capacity for autonomous action at the local level, as distinct from plan-led action driven primarily from the centre. This would allow different communities to focus on priorities and solutions that are fit for their context – whether focused on enterprise skills, on supporting newly-unemployed people, self-employment or specific or soft skills. Local actors and leaders take seriously their role as caretakers of the economy, and, being in direct dialogue with citizens and customers, are best-placed to understand and respond with agility to skills needs as they unfold – if supported by more flexible funding. Effective local action could be enhanced through networks of providers playing to their strengths and collaborating to achieve locally agreed priorities.
19. Many participants felt that local actors should come together to provide leadership and shape policy in their areas. Because the system is fragmented between national, regional and local programmes, a coalition is needed locally to ‘*knit*’ programmes and budgets together into a coherent economic and social strategy. One participant gave an example of a local government in North Carolina that worked with partners to devise a joint solution to an environmental waste problem (specifically, the effluent from large-scale pig farming). By drawing on a range of expertise in the community and local state, they were able to address a problem previously assumed to be intractable. Action across public service boundaries to deliver jointly-developed strategies can transform outcomes.

20. Strategies could be drafted and implemented by local partnerships, similar to the Local Strategic Partnerships that draft Local Area Agreements (LAAs) (and on which many FE providers already sit). Such a coalition can knit together existing resources, however disparate they are at present, and develop a coherent economic and social strategy. They can, as they gain confidence and administrative ability, *'progress to create local strategies that can be sold to government, rather than managing government disorganisation locally'*.
21. Some participants stressed the importance of doing things at the appropriate level of administration (a principle sometimes referred to, especially by the European Union, as *'subsidiarity'*, which can also mean doing things at the level of government located nearest the people). Participants stressed, in particular, that regional authorities should only do those things best handled by a regional-level entity.

Innovation

22. Much of the discussion focused on developing a service that does what customers and employers want it to do, which requires a greater degree of innovation. This is also vital if providers, and all public services, are to maintain quality services on reduced budgets. Innovation happens during customer interaction in response to actual needs and demands – this was referred to as *'passing the 11 o'clock test'*, meaning that innovation is the measure of how well an institution responds to any customer who walks into, say, a college at 11 o'clock in the morning.
23. However, innovation is by nature a process of trial and error, and when learning and skills providers err, they are often harshly punished by the existing performance management system. Can we create some safe space for innovation and experimentation around measuring impact which does not carry the risk of providers' performance and reputation being jeopardised? Can we look at how we enable flexibility of response while sustaining confidence in the quality and outcomes of provision? Several attendees said they felt local councils and partnerships were making greater strides in innovating than the centre. The Innovation Hub (see Dr Su Maddock's speaking notes on page 38) is trying to foster *'bottom-up partnerships'* and innovation at the local level, and to connect proactive, go-getting local actors with the central civil servants who can help advance their agendas .

Meeting customer needs in the round

24. To realise the full benefits of a more autonomous system, and to really make an effective contribution to fighting the recession, learning and skills providers need to be able to innovate to design responses that meet specific needs. A key aspect of professionalism is the capacity to work in a more connected and fluid manner with allied professions, and develop new holistic approaches towards our customers and learners. It was noted that the mental health care sector had failed to do this, maintaining the same, custodial system of care for decades on end.

25. Dr Maddock related the story of the Lancashire police, who met all their targets but were unpopular with the public, which could not see any drop in crime rates and did not feel the police were meeting public needs. The police in Lancashire began holding ‘*community conversations*’ and connecting with the public, to provide a more popular and responsive service, and one that citizens were more clearly aware of. The perceptions of citizens and customers are critical. What is the learning and skills equivalent of ‘*community conversations*’ that build both our understanding of and our legitimacy with citizens?
26. Another example given was in relation to supporting young people not in employment, education and training. Dr Maddock also referred to the recovery approach that recognises the benefits of engaging mental patients in thinking about life goals and aspirations – this significantly aids recovery. It was suggested that to engage young people we need to be more respectful of their immediate aspirations and needs than the delivery paradigm often assumes. Research suggests, for example, that they often want to learn something domestic or familiar, close to their existing life, rather than stepping far into a new world. We need to find ways of engaging with the ambitions of these young people as human beings not just as targets for skills acquisition if we are to support them effectively. It was noted how hard it is to take ‘*off the lens*’ of institutional success to look through the eyes of individual learners at what would be successful outcomes for them.
27. This led to a discussion about the pressures on public services to work in silos and the difficulty of making operational connections between different public sector disciplines – health, social care, welfare, education, etc – for the benefit of citizens. How do we re-design services around customers and citizens so they interconnect?³
28. Providers need to ‘*segment audiences*’, tailoring their responses to specific demographic groups. Much customer research is done on the basis of gender or ethnicity and is somewhat outdated – we should also beware assuming stereotypes.

Funding that enables responsiveness

29. Efficiencies and enhanced impact might be achieved through greater flexibility to use funds more innovatively. The range of initiatives created by multiple departments, agencies and local councils – working towards roughly the same goals and outcomes – generates a multiplicity of budgets, often devoted to a single, narrow purpose. Providers receive a wide variety of these funds, but can only use them for that one purpose – they cannot pool these resources for a larger programme. This means it is hard to form coherent economic and social strategies for the community or sub-region; hampers attempts to fund any broadly-based project; and forces partnerships into time-consuming campaigns to gather the necessary funds from all the available spigots. This undercuts the efforts of local partnerships.

³ This point resonated with discussions held in other seminars about the need for public services to be able to operate in greater collaboration at the local level. See the seminar report - Identifying the contribution of FE providers to local priorities, partners and places -here: <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/ContributionofFEtoLocalPrioritiesPartnersandPlace.sflb>

30. Funding silos make it more difficult for providers to achieve efficiencies of scale and to be able to flexibly deploy resources to meet needs, and in the more stringent times ahead, will increase the risk of insolvency. Funding mechanisms, it was suggested, might move away from being based on a fixed price towards an approach where individual or networks of providers bid to achieve the greatest value and impact with the resource available, responding to both nationally and locally-identified priorities.
31. By allowing greater flexibility, providers could work much more effectively in local partnerships, as they would be able to direct resources as needed, and not have to spend disproportionate amounts of time and energy drawing together many different budgets and examining the rules for each. Again, the LAA model, with its greater use of single-pot funding, was singled out as a possible model.

Demand vs. need

32. We need funding mechanisms that allow us to make the greatest possible impact with the money available, on the actual needs encountered and within broadly agreed priorities. However, it was felt that the description of funding as '*demand-led*' is unhelpful as currently operationalised given that it can only be drawn down for highly prescribed categories of demand, not the range actually needed by individuals or businesses. Also, demand already outstrips the available resource and therefore has to be rationed – and this is likely to increase in the recession. The promise of '*demand-led*' is not therefore delivered to customers.
33. While participants accepted skills and industrial activism as part of a strategic response, they feared that they could lead to a domination of planning over the market mechanism. Although the recession might be seen as a failure of market mechanisms it is also a failure of planning – both the market, the traditional solution of the political right, and planning, the traditional solution of the political left, have failed. A new and more differentiated settlement between planning and market mechanisms is needed.
34. The current system cannot be described as demand-led, or at least not in the purest sense of the term. Funding does follow demand, but only if that demand is for prescribed, and rather narrow, types of programmes, and not necessarily the range actually wanted and needed by individuals and businesses (though some of these restrictions have been lifted since the recession began). Furthermore, demand is now greater than the public purse can provide for, forcing the state to increase rationing and further diminish the role of demand in the system.
35. As such, the term '*demand-led*' is neither accurate nor helpful. Participants felt we need to enunciate the difference between a '*demand-led*' system, which is what employers and individuals want, and '*needs-led*', which is what government thinks the nation requires, and that we should make clear that the current system is not fully demand-led. Another short-coming of the current '*demand-led*' approach is that the sector is primarily driven by targets based on the attainment of qualifications which are a poor proxy for skills, and may not meet needs.

36. Some said that we need to change our notion of ‘need’. We tend to see ‘need’ as being a ‘deficit’ that people suffer, rather than people having a need for fulfilment or advancement – the ambition referred to by Michael Davis (see his speaking notes on page 35). The discussion highlighted the need for a language to describe the funding approach which is accurate and does not confuse or raise false expectations. We also noted the importance of recognising that ‘demand is shifting sands’, particularly in volatile economic times – and that prescriptive definitions of ‘fundable demand’ can make it harder for providers to respond to actual demand.

Performance management

37. One of the key challenges to an effective sector response to the recession was identified as the impact of national targets. The current Public Service Agreement targets were set in 2007, before the recession took hold, and the related performance measures were also developed at that time. It was suggested that they are ill-suited to govern a sector now being reoriented towards fighting the recession, particularly since the sector has arguably become ‘target-responsive’ rather than ‘learner-responsive’.
38. With the recession, there is a need for measures around employment, and especially ‘sustainable employment’. Moreover, these measures should gauge how many learners are assisted into sustainable employment, and not the processes used to get them there.
39. It was noted that targets are strongly related to qualifications which are used as a proxy for skills. This is a shaky proposition at best – one delegate suggested that many of the people who obtain qualifications on Train to Gain already have the skills required, and are merely getting those skills formally accredited. Some said that the metrics measured what could ‘be improved quickly’, and not actual improvement in skills levels. One participant noted that learners’ ideas of success often have little to do with attaining qualifications.
40. Indeed, the strongest message in terms of the system was the consensus that the performance management system in the learning and skills sector should be based on measuring outcomes, rather than on the processes by which things get done or on ‘ironclad’ numerical targets. These outcomes might be broad policy objectives, rather than specific numerical targets. Such a system would allow more room to innovate and create new approaches. Accounting for processes takes up a great deal of time that could be better devoted to leadership of teaching and learning – the current system creates ‘clutter’.
41. Local Area Agreements (LAAs) were again suggested as a model. These allow local partnerships to select a list of targets from the National Indicator Set for Local Government, and take responsibility for them collectively. They are then judged on how well they meet these outcomes. It was suggested that the sector mount a pilot to show how this might be done. Providers or regulators could use impact analysis or surveys to determine if the indicators are being met.

42. A major development that arose from the previous seminar series on regulation was an understanding⁴ with DIUS (now BIS) that, within the spirit of moving towards greater sector engagement in shaping its regulatory arrangements, the Single Voice would prioritise performance measures as an area for development. The seminar discussion highlighted the urgency of making progress on shaping performance measures to enable the sector to respond more effectively during the current recession and beyond.

Accountability and systems

43. One consistent challenge faced by local partnerships and local public services is that it can be unclear to whom they feel accountable. While funding demands ‘*vertical accountability*’ to national government, credibility with customers and citizens demands accountability to the locality – what we described as ‘*horizontal accountability*’. Is their first priority to be accountable to local citizens or local government, or to the national government? Or both equally? Some suggested partnerships should be accountable to ‘*national and local goals*’, to delivering ‘*national entitlements within the local community*’.
44. To implement effective anti-recession strategies at the local level, we concluded that we need ‘*horizontal accountability*’, through bodies that jointly can establish legitimacy and take broad responsibility for delivering locally agreed priorities, and with the freed-up headroom in national funding and accountability to do so. These could be based on devolved arrangements such as in London, Scotland and Wales, and could craft programmes that can be ‘*sold*’ to the central government, in similar mode to Local Area Agreements. This would allow responsiveness to the locality whilst retaining a means for central government departmental priorities to be addressed.
45. While there was agreement about the need for rationalising programmes and delivery mechanisms at the local level in some way, there was no clear consensus on what structures should be developed. If the central government does devolve power, to whom would it go? The necessary institutions are still under development. Some wondered if the resulting bodies would look like the Greater London Authority or the devolved administrations. Others said they would be ‘*statutory boards handling regional issues*’. One attendee expressed concern that devolution could theoretically cost more, by duplicating management tiers and bureaucracy rather than redistributing it.
46. Thus while there was general dissatisfaction with the interplay of arrangements at local, regional and national levels, there were no easy solutions or detailed consensus about how arrangements should develop, nor about how existing tensions could be resolved in the short-term. Moreover, human relationships are pivotal to the success of local communities, and elegant structural arrangements can only take us part of the way. Without the commitment of the people involved, structures are useless. In any case, it will take time to develop new structures – for a while yet, ‘*creative and agile knitters*’ will still be required to navigate the system.

4 The outcomes of the seminars and the subsequent discussions between DIUS, Single Voice and LSIS are available here: <http://www.lsis.org.uk/PolicyServices/Discussion/SeminarSeries/ShiftingTheParadigm.aspx>

Professional improvement and systems improvement

47. We noted that Sir Michael Barber, a key architect of public service reform in the Blair era, has recently argued that, having been through a prolonged process of improvement of professional practice – the major focus of nationally-driven public service reform programmes – we now need to move to a new stage focused on ‘*systems improvement*’. We have made enormous progress improving professional practice, but there will be diminishing returns unless we start to change some of the systems that now inhibit effective service delivery. In the current environment when we know that major financial restraints are coming, it becomes increasingly critical to eliminate grit and drag in the systems.
48. We discussed a number of times this interplay between ‘*systems and structures*’ and the ‘*attributes, skills and behaviours of people*’ that are needed to make the whole system work to best effect. We highlighted the need for both efficient and elegant systems and appropriate human behaviours. Although individual vision, commitment and perseverance can make great things happen energy is wasted and additional effort is required if systems are complex and inhibiting.
49. Given the urgency in the current climate for efficient use of resources, we must identify and address inhibitors of effective practice. We identified several constraints, including overly prescriptive funding streams, slowness in the development of new qualifications, and performance measures and targets which do not allow the vital ‘*knitting*’ to be carried out without penalty to reputation or financial viability.
50. New structures that enable alignment and integration of national policy and local priorities in the locality do not appear to be an immediate option. The immediate solution lies primarily with the ‘*creative and agile knitters*’, the professionals who make existing systems work through lateral steerage and leadership, establishing legitimacy for action through good relationships, consensus and shared vision within their localities, rather than through formal authority. ‘*Vibrancy is not found in systems and structures – it’s found in people and communities... People will find the solution.*’

Part two – Keynote presentations

Seminar one: Responding to the recession – the national strategy

Employment and skills – an overview of DWP strategies to combat the recession David Shaw, Head of Policy, Economic Impact Unit, DWP	Page 17
Learning and skills – an overview of DIUS strategies to combat the recession John Landeryou, Director of Learning, Quality and Systems Directorate, DIUS	Page 19
Business and enterprise – an overview of BERR strategies to combat the recession Fiona Price, Director of Skills and Migration, BERR	Page 21
Creating a coherent strategy at the front-line – opportunities and challenges Paul Head, Principal, College of North East London	Page 23

Seminar two: Responding to the recession – regional and local responses

Economic strategy in action – a view from a city-region. Mike Emmerich, Chief Executive, Commission for the New Economy, Greater Manchester	Page 25
Supporting employment and skills – the role of the Learning and Skills Council Paul Holme, Economic Response Director, LSC	Page 28
Designing the new – current thinking on the Skills Funding Agency. Bobbie McClelland, Deputy Director, Skills Funding Agency Transition Directorate, DIUS	Page 30
Sector responses:	
Christina Conroy OBE, Principal and Chief Executive, Richmond Adult Community College	Page 31
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Seminar three: Beyond the recession – preparing for the upturn

What do we mean by a more “strategic, agile and demand-led employment and skills system”? Michael Davis, Director of Strategy and Performance, UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)	Page 35
Responsiveness through innovation – creating the conditions for innovation flow Dr Su Maddock, Director, The Whitehall Innovation Hub, National School of Government	Page 38
Sector responses:	
Helen Groves, Chief Executive Officer, Humber Learning Consortium	Page 40
Andy Wilson, Principal, Westminster Kingsway College	Page 42
The chair of the seminar series was Simon Jack, business news reporter with the BBC	

Seminar one: Responding to the recession – the national strategy

Employment and skills – an overview of DWP strategies to combat the recession

David Shaw

Head of Policy, Economic Impact Unit, DWP



51. David's presentations included a series of slides⁵, which can be accessed through the LSIS website.
52. David's contribution was divided into three parts: an overview of the current state of the labour market, the DWP response, and an indication of what his department would like the learning and skills sector to do to help fulfil policy goals.
53. David explained that the labour market indicators present a complex picture. On the one hand, headline levels of employment are falling, and unemployment levels are increasing, (both in terms of the number of people seeking benefits and by the ILO measure of unemployment). On the other hand, the job market still has some 450,000 vacancies.
54. Furthermore, most unemployed do not stay out of work very long. DWP figures show that about 50-60 per cent of the unemployed are back in work after three months, and 75 per cent after six. More people are leaving Jobseeker's Allowance now than were at this time in 2008. All told, the labour market remains 'dynamic'.
55. David said, DWP's anti-recession policy has three major elements. First, DWP is increasing funding to Jobcentre Plus ensuring they can deliver a high standard of service to increasing numbers of customers.
56. The second element of DWP's response focuses on those who have been unemployed for six months. Several programmes have been instituted to expand the job and training opportunities open to them, including:
 - 'golden hellos', which are £1,000 recruitment subsidies paid to employers who hire new workers. These workers will also receive workplace training;
 - new training places;
 - work-based volunteering options; and
 - aid to help unemployed people set up their own businesses, including financial support and advice.

5 Available here http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/DWP_LSSandtheEconomicCrisis.sflb

57. The final strand of the DWP's anti-recession efforts is directed at those who have been unemployed for a full year, and especially towards people in this group who are between the ages of 18 and 24 (if a person is unemployed early on in life, it makes it more likely they will be chronically jobless later in life). The chief measure DWP is employing is a publicly funded '*guaranteed offer of meaningful activity*' for a period of six months for all young people who have been unemployed for a year. This activity can take the form of:
- paying jobs, funded by the £1 billion Future Jobs Fund, which will supply the money for new places to local authorities and their partners;
 - recruitment subsidies and training for key sectors, such as care services (which will see 50,000 new places);
 - work-focused training, in the shape of new courses for 80,000 people; and
 - volunteering with Community Task Forces.
58. David then suggested areas where the learning and skills sector could contribute to his department's work. The guarantee for young unemployed people comes into effect from January 2010, and the learning and skills sector could help supply the necessary jobs and training. The sector can also tailor work-focused training to local needs, and make it flexible enough so that the learner can continue the course even after he becomes employed.
59. David noted that the funds described above are, or will be, routed through Jobcentre Plus, and that all these programmes are being studied to determine how well they are serving the unemployed.

Learning and skills – an overview of DIUS strategies to combat the recession

John Landeryou

Director, Learning, Quality and Systems Directorate, DIUS



60. John Landeryou from DIUS began by noting that the crisis lacks an agreed starting point. Rather, we became aware of different aspects of it at differing times – some predicted a crisis in 2006 and 2007, as housing prices ballooned, while for others the crisis began in September 2008 when the American investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed. No one accurately predicted the crisis, and no one knows what, if any, historical model the current recession will mimic.
61. The unpredictability of the nature of the downturn has made it very difficult to forward plan policies to fight it. Policies are made to address specific aspects as they emerge, and because the public demands some sort of action. At the same time, because faith in unconstrained market forces has been eroded, their influence on policy has diminished. It is not difficult to work out the possible policy responses, but it is much harder to work out how far or how fast to go in a particular direction.
62. DIUS, John said, is planning for the upturn as well as for the recession, and cited the department's investment in expanding apprenticeships as an example of this. The department is modifying existing programmes and creating new ones such as the training offers linked to length of unemployment.
63. DIUS is keen to '*protect the front line*', meaning that it wants to maintain a maximum level of participation. For this reason, funding is being shifted to the front line from intermediary bodies. Other priorities for the future include supporting training fit for the future economy, and providing a greater proportion of available support to the private sector. The government has introduced more flexible funding rules, more funding for re-skilling, and is investing in key sectors of the economy (most notably the automotive industry). DIUS is also committed to developing the country's capacity in science and technology.
64. John said that his department was also concerned with the jobless, especially those graduating this year. DIUS has created new intern schemes for the class of 2009, and a new graduate recruitment office.
65. John urged providers to examine their '*mainstream activities and budgets to complement DIUS's new initiatives*'. There will be a '*premium*' on agility and flexibility, because the recession's course is so hard to forecast. DIUS itself has become more flexible, funding units of qualifications separately and allowing learners to begin qualifications in college and complete them elsewhere. He noted the connection to the '*skills activism*' agenda, in which government plays a key role in supporting strategic skills needs.

66. DIUS, through the LSC, will also '*become more aggressive in removing poor provision*'. There will probably be '*more and different contestability*', in which providers will be judged on the price they offer. At the learning and skills system level, success could also be measured differently in the future, for example, by the macroeconomic impact of each programme. At the provider level this might lead to more attention being paid to progression rates and employment rates following learning. John also said that diversification should be important for the sector, to allow them to attract a larger number of funding streams.
67. John finished by saying that the '*reputation of the sector has been in the ascendant*' in recent years, but that this would not necessarily last forever. The sector must succeed in meeting the challenges posed by the recession if it is to retain its standing.

Business and enterprise – an overview of BERR strategies to combat the recession

Fiona Price

Director of Skills and Migration, BERR



68. Fiona Price spoke for the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR). She works for the Business Environment Unit, which exists *‘to influence the rest of government on issues important to business and the economy’*. It does not, however, simply repeat business views but seeks to be a critical friend.
69. From BERR’s perspective, the crisis began with the credit crunch. Businesses which appeared viable went to the wall because they could not access short-term credit, while less healthy businesses pleaded for state aid. The government created a credit scheme to provide loans and capital funding, and allowed businesses to defer some tax payments. The Government also pledged a more prompt payment of invoices (within 10 days).
70. BERR is also planning for the post-recession economy, which poses both challenges and opportunities. Even with the current turmoil, China and India are still growing, albeit more slowly than before, and the global economy will still double in size in the near future. Competition will remain fierce, and the recent judgment of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), which concluded in its *Ambition 2020* paper⁶ that Britain will not meet the majority of its 2020 skills targets, will present a threat to future prosperity.
71. The British economy will take a different shape after 2010. Public spending will be constrained, there will be a greater demand for efficiency in public spending, and the private sector may take a larger role in the provision of public services. Economic growth will be driven by high-value services, which will spur an increase in exports.
72. BERR lays out its plan for managing the transition to the post-2010 economy in a document called *Building Britain’s Future – New Industry, New Jobs*⁷. The Government’s strategy will be more interventionist, and recognise that market failure is a more frequent problem than previously thought. Government policy will *‘work with the grain of the market’* rather than allow the market alone to set the economic agenda. Fiona also said that the Government would try to make *‘smarter use of its economic power’*.
73. Whitehall is trying to align its policies across the various departments. In some cases, Fiona said, government action will not be effective in encouraging economic growth. The state must identify those areas in which its aid will be useful. Building Britain’s Future focuses on five areas: infrastructure, skills, trade, technology and innovation.

6 http://www.ukces.org.uk/PDF/UKCES_FullReport_USB_A2020.pdf

7 http://www.dius.gov.uk/~media/publications/N/new_industry_new_jobs

74. Fiona promised more government help for exporters, technological development and infrastructure development. It would look to provide better economic forecasting and a better understanding of how public expenditure affects certain sectors of the economy.
75. Regarding skills, the government will identify those skills most needed by the new economy and try to support these. The state must respond to the future skills needs of business, which demand cannot do as effectively as it meets the present, short-term skills needs of business. The government will work with employers, via the Sector Skills Councils and UKCES, to collect information on skills demand, and increase employer voice in skills development. It will also make sure the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is sufficiently agile to meet employer demand.
76. For learning and skills providers, these policies will require them to engage with local businesses, and thus become agile, flexible and business-responsive. Providers will be expected to explain to learners why skills are economically valuable, and will be measured on the macroeconomic impact of their provision. Fiona finished by asking what barriers might exist to implementing these principles, and how BERR could help remove them.

Creating a coherent strategy at the front-line – opportunities and challenges

Paul Head

Principal, College of North East London



77. Paul offered a response to the departmental presentations from an FE college perspective. He started by responding to an earlier statement that we cannot predict the future of public spending. ‘Yes we can!’ The tax burden will increase, but spending will be restrained so that the UK can pay off the enormous debts contracted in fighting the recession and saving the banks. This is unprecedented in recent memory, Paul said – during the 1980s, growth of public spending slowed but it did not stop it in real terms, which is what we are facing now. Public expenditure has grown especially strongly, and steadily, for the past eight years and we have become used to that environment, but we now have to face a very different scenario.
78. Paul said the departmental representatives ‘*did a fantastic job of bringing coherence to panic*’ given the amount of public money it has directed towards supporting employment, skills and other relief programmes is relatively small – it’s ‘*spending at the margins. We really have to make our funding work for this new scenario*’.
79. There are two elephants in the room: the Treasury, which will be calling for cuts across the board to pay off the debt, and 10 Downing Street, whose public service reform programme might clash with the new economic planning.
80. Paul then moved on to quote Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political scientist (and co-founder of their Communist Party). Gramsci spoke of two types of politics: the ‘*politics of position*’, which is about acting to defend guiding principles and values – for example, social justice, equality and diversity, local need and public service values; and ‘*the politics of manoeuvre*’, which comprise responses to immediate political demands. The politics of manoeuvre fail to address core problems or solve systemic issues, like the ones identified in the *Ambition 2020* paper. That paper also identifies priorities and principles, such as up-skilling, re-skilling, improving productivity and (especially important) ensuring value for money. These are the strategic priorities that the learning and skills sector must support, with whatever resources it has available.
81. ‘*Don’t panic!*’ Panicky initiatives often fail to reduce unemployment or raise skills – rafts of short courses help no one. Institutions must ensure that the Government’s funding for these initiatives translates into meaningful outcomes.
82. There should be a focus on the medium and long term as well as the short term, on problems such as long-term unemployment and migration patterns. Creating new jobs is all well and good, but does the electorate little good if they are not skilled enough to fill them, and they instead go to immigrant workers.

83. Paul advised participants not to join every consortium or sign on to every initiative. Often, providers do this to obtain money and keep themselves in business, rather than actually help fulfil local and national need and policy. *'I'm not running around'*, Paul said. *'I'm thinking strategically about what I can do to fight the recession in my area with my overall financial resources'*, including the new funds devoted specifically to fighting the recession. (The chair described this as *'the Arsène Wenger approach to running a college'*, referring to the Arsenal manager). If providers do not think strategically, then they will put on a large amount of provision which will have to be cut when the recession ends, creating job losses. There is not enough guidance to help providers reposition themselves for the changes in funding that will result when the downturn ends.
84. Reconfiguration of providers and the funding and planning arrangements are needed to make a significant impact on employability and skills.

Seminar two: Responding to the recession – regional and local responses

Economic strategy in action – a view from a city-region

Mike Emmerich

Chief Executive, Commission for the New Economy



85. Mike began with a brief explanation of what his commission is and how it came to be. The Commission for the New Economy is a joint board established by the 10 local authorities of the Greater Manchester area⁸. It grew out of an earlier body called Manchester Enterprises. The commission is responsible for the area development strategy, the Greater Manchester Multi-Area Agreement (MAA) and negotiations with the central government on the area's city-region status.
86. The commission, Mike notes, is not a statutory body, though it may gain statutory footing under new legislation. At present, it is a wholly voluntary body created by the region's local authorities on their own initiative. As such, it is unique in England, the RDAs and London Development Agency (LDA) being established by law.
87. Mike then turned to Government anti-recession spending and policy. He said the Government has '*turned the taps on big time*', with large-scale interventions in monetary and fiscal policy (the latter a form of Keynesian economic theory). The response to this has been positive, and has had the effect of ameliorating the effects of the recession to some extent. '*But I'm not sanguine about the future*', Mike said, though he stressed this wasn't because he felt the government's response was flawed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the government's stimuli are having an effect. Instead, Mike's pessimism stems from his doubts about the '*architecture*' of the national system, which he said was '*in deep, deep trouble*'.
88. Manchester, to a degree greater than other parts of the nation, benefitted from record economic growth between the end of the recession of the early 1990s and 2008. One-twentieth of money spent in the UK is spent in Greater Manchester. However, even after more than a decade of expansion, Greater Manchester still had 200,000 claiming out of work benefits and 400,000 who lacked basic skills⁹, despite being an economic success story. Nor did the city make any headway in closing the income gap between itself and the South East of England.

8 City of Manchester, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, Wigan, City of Salford, and Trafford.

9 The population of Greater Manchester was 2,562,200 in 2007.

89. The commission's response to these structural faults in the labour market was to set up the Manchester Independent Economic Review¹⁰, at a cost of £1.25 million. The review, led by an independent board chaired by Sir Tom McKillop, mapped Manchester's economic future and its economic relations with surrounding areas. It concluded that the city-region was the key to driving growth in the North of England and in the UK too. But it also concluded that the region faced policy choices, perhaps being too focused on building new infrastructure, and not enough on early years' education and skills (including high-level skills).
90. To maximise the economic opportunity, a number of policy and governance reforms need to be made, Mike said. The current system was characterised by duplication between local authorities, regional administration and the national government and a proliferation of budgets and targets across all three areas.
91. Mike called for a focus on '*place*', how strategy at all levels can achieve sustainable growth. His place, of course, is a large metropolitan area, and he noted that large cities provide certain economies of scale, through '*agglomeration*' and the creation of a '*critical mass*'. Larger cities are more competitive, and as long as they can cope effectively with the consequences of urban growth, they can grow almost indefinitely. Funding models should take this phenomenon into account because the economics suggests that the way we allocate funds (outside London) spreads resource so evenly we do not exploit our potential growth nodes whilst we do not tackle deprivation as well as we need to.
92. In the same vein, Mike called for an end to strict per capita funding. Cities and metropolises are more likely to drive national economic growth whilst also containing the largest concentrations of need.
93. The national government does possess many organisational strengths. Despite the recent expenses scandal, British government is notably clean and uncorrupted, especially in comparison to other states. There is a clear focus on delivery by each department, and ministers are held strictly to account by Parliament for the workings of their specific department (though not for those of government as a whole).
94. Mike noted that no serious problem is '*mono-causal*' – instead, they all have many causes. To meet these problems, there must be more '*horizontal accountability*' within a local area – '*a devolved, accountable, legal body with overall responsibility for an area*'. There must be a rebalancing of responsibility between national and local. Devolution might take a shape similar to the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and London, which would receive block grants from central government and then devise their own budgets. What may be different is the need for accountability for outcomes to central government.
95. However, devolution is not always possible or desirable in every area, as many localities lack the capacity to take on that level of self-governance. As Chris Humphries, chief executive of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), suggested in his analysis, devolution should be adopted in phases across the country, and we should work to build capacity for self-government in those areas which currently lack it.

10 Read it at: <http://www.manchester-review.org.uk/download/?id=642>

96. Although a uniform national policy makes sense in many policy areas (defence, industrial subsidies, monetary policy and so on), it is not helpful to draft skills and employment policy in this way. Regions may have similar skills and employment goals, but they start from different bases and require different interventions. There is no working national system that takes account of these disparities, while local innovation can add value and deal with these problems more effectively.
97. People often try to work to local and national mandates but when, as when recession hits, there are conflicting priorities (even just time priorities). In such cases, the most important will win – i.e. where accountability lies – usually national. This then creates the ‘*silo*’ effect so often noted by those in public policy. The central government is not designed to be joined up at the local level. Lots of positive joint working goes on, diligent public servants working at the margins of their briefs. But this is not really an adequate response to a quite serious design issue.
98. In tackling recession, the existing regional architecture does not seem to play cities into the debate. The regional Joint Economic Councils, under the regional ministers, do not share minutes, let alone agendas. There are also regional skills and employment boards whose relationships with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are unclear. Jobcentre Plus and the LSC also do not work well together – for example, there are still real problems of cross referrals, and regional skills and employment pilots, though welcome, do not go far enough to meet local needs.
99. As a result of this, councils continue to invest in skills and employment to compensate for perceived failures. Sometimes, more often than is desirable, this investment confuses an already complicated system.
100. At present, the local arms of national and regional institutions are not set up to promote horizontal accountability. No one is accountable for economic and social services at the local level. Despite the best efforts of dedicated public servants in every agency, the results are duplication and service gaps and such a system ‘*will not survive the coming fiscal contraction*’. So, where there is the capacity to do so, such as in Manchester, local institutions should be strengthened so that they can exercise this sort of oversight. The introduction of these new structures should be in phases, with areas being given more autonomy and authority when ready.
101. The recession risks forcing the government to divert resources away from the long-term unemployed (those suffering ‘*worklessness*’, according to the 2007 Freud Report) to the newly redundant. More support needs to be provided to long-term unemployed, and regional strategy should shift from backing infrastructure projects to investing in human capital. Mike is optimistic about the Future Jobs Fund, which provides jobs or job-like activities for young people who have been unemployed for a year or more.
102. Mike said that Manchester’s institutional history rendered the role of colleges rather ‘*problematic*’. The legacy of the old Manchester Enterprises seemed to be associated with a ‘*history of mutual suspicion*’ damaging relations between them and the new Greater Manchester governance architecture. Sir Bill Moorcroft, principal of Trafford College is on the Commission Board, which is helping to establish new and effective local relationships, and create a coherent approach and strategy which includes the LSC.

Supporting employment and skills – the role of the Learning and Skills Council

Paul Holme

Economic Response Director, LSC



103. Paul began by explaining his own role in the LSC. In addition to his work on the economic crisis, Paul is also director for skills, including Train to Gain, the Sector Skills Councils and apprenticeships. He also works in the North West region of England, and has worked in Greater Merseyside and Cumbria. He has been with the LSC since it was first created in 2001.
104. He also told the seminar to keep young people in mind in their planning, though he said he would not go into detail on this point.
105. Paul said that the LSC was pursuing three strategies:
- working with employers to keep them involved in training their staff;
 - dealing with the expanding numbers of newly unemployed and long-term unemployed; and
 - expanding apprenticeships, especially for those aged 16 to 18.
106. Paul said there were ‘*important spatial issues*’. At the national level, policies, targets, management information and indicators must be fit for purpose. Regional partnerships should be formed to deal with matters (and only those matters) best dealt with at that level. The definition of ‘*place*’, Paul noted, may vary depending on the issue being addressed.
107. Train to Gain is ‘*employer responsive*’. The programme has previously suffered from low take-up, but demand is increasing, and colleges have become more responsive. The increased flexibilities introduced into the funding requirements have also encouraged more employers to use the programme.
108. How do we prioritise public spending when the money gets tight? Should providers decide? National bodies? Regional bodies? Employment and Skills Boards? How and where do we integrate employment and skills? Increased unemployment will require strong regional and local responses, as unemployment rates and the demographic profile of the jobless varies across the country.
109. The LSC is pursuing a three-pronged strategy to counter unemployment, focusing on:
- increased support for the newly unemployed;
 - programmes for those who have been out of work for six months; and
 - programmes aimed at people aged 18 to 24 who have been unemployed for a year¹¹.

11 This reflects the overall strategy adopted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – see David Shaw’s presentation on this in the report of the first seminar here http://www.isis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/DWP_LSSandtheEconomicCrisis.sflb

110. The budgets available are small compared to the overall further education budget. We must also utilise the adult learner response budget to support progression back into work.
111. In future, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) will as well as being a national body will be responsive to local needs and priorities.
112. Paul asked if funding and planning should be more '*nuanced*' in order to prioritise certain activities and meet future demand. The system must deliver '*sectoral and regional agendas*'.

Designing the new – current thinking on the Skills Funding Agency

Bobbie McClelland

Deputy Director, Skills Funding Agency Transition

Directorate, DIUS



113. Bobbie’s presentation focused on the role of the Skills Funding Agency in the new post-19 system, and was accompanied by a series of explanatory slides¹². Bobbie stated that the Skills Funding Agency will be focused on employers and learners, and would be demand led, which she defined as *‘responsive to the needs of learners and employers’*. It will *‘fund, not plan’*, and encourage providers to be responsive. Its core principle is about delivering *‘coherence and choice for employers and learners’*.
115. The Skills Funding Agency will house the National Apprenticeship Service and manage Train to Gain, the Adult Advancement and Careers Service and learner services delivered through colleges and providers. She added that in designing the Skills Funding Agency, the opportunity had been taken to ensure any overlaps or duplication were removed, such as, with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and LSIS.
116. Sub-nationally, the Skills Funding Agency will work to support the demand side at the regional level and sub-regional level to ensure demand is identified. To assist this, work is currently underway to agree protocols on how the Skills Funding Agency will work with the UKCES, RDAs, employment and skills boards and Jobcentre Plus. On the supply side, the Skills Funding Agency will have responsibility for ensuring that the system has the capacity to support development in areas of strategic importance to the economy; reflecting the drive on skills activism. In doing so, it will work with self-organised skills networks of colleges and providers who come together collaboratively to respond to demand.
117. The Skills Funding Agency services will be underpinned by a national approach to managing relations with each college and provider, with a single account manager for each institution/provider. The Skills Funding Agency will also house a new Information Systems unit which will be responsible for delivering cross sector services, including for example the FE Data Service, which will streamline data collection from colleges and learning providers and organise appropriate exchange of data with local authorities.
118. The Skills Funding Agency will become operational in April 2010. The LSC is currently going through a matching process (in line with TUPE) to determine which of its staff will be transferred to the Skills Funding Agency, which to the pre-19 agency (the Young People’s Learning Agency), and which to local authorities. The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill establishing the Skills Funding Agency is currently before the House of Lords, and its final passage is expected in autumn 2009. An investment strategy will be published in autumn 2009, which will deal with the funding system for 2010/11.

12 Available here <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/DIUSslides.sflb>

Sector response

Christina Conroy OBE

Principal, Richmond Adult Community College



120. Christina began by saying she had spent most of her career in Outer London and the Home Counties, and has been in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames for about nine years.
121. Richmond is home to about 180,000 people. The public sector is poorly funded relative to other Local Authorities, and thus the state support is very limited. This lack of resources also hinders other public bodies like the NHS trust and the housing authority. Richmond's economic development policy called *Vibrant and Prosperous* has effectively been pre-empted by the recession.
122. Partnership is vital in Richmond, because no one actor can do much on its own. The local authorities lack funding, and colleges are tied into restrictive budgets. Thus, pooling resources is imperative. There is a '*real job for colleges*' in developing a horizontal leadership strategy.
123. An economic analysis of Richmond found that 60 per cent of local jobs were in '*high-risk industries*', such as finance where unemployment has tripled. There are now only 300 job vacancies in the borough, while 500 graduates are set to return. The increase in the short-term unemployed is overwhelming the system. The government's job advice for graduates is rather unimpressive, Christina added.
124. Richmond has an '*architecture for prosperity, not recession*'. Jobcentre Plus is trained to deal with the long-term unemployed, often people without skills or with serious health problems. It is not set up to handle highly-skilled professionals who have been recently made redundant, and does not always provide such people proper support. There also needs to be more provision to support enterprise.
125. The economy and the public sector will look very different in the next few years. Employment rates do not improve as quickly as the economy as a whole – after the recession of the early 1980s, employment rates did not return to their pre-recession level before the next recession in the early '90s – indeed, a full recovery in employment did not occur until 1997.
126. The public sector, too, will be very different. A large portion of its functions will be delivered by the third sector, and the public sector must learn to manage third-sector providers. There will also be an increased emphasis on place and localism, focused on a '*quality of life agenda*', and the public sector will have to learn to support this.

127. A major problem facing local partners in Richmond is the multiplicity of initiatives. Richmond partners mapped the funding streams in the borough, finding 10 different types of initiative, which often *'trip over each other'*. It requires enormous effort to link together funding streams. We should *'capacity-build local areas'* to manage joint projects and aggregate funding so it can be used effectively.
128. A key priority for Richmond is promoting entrepreneurship. So for example, teachers of cake decorating are helping learners to become self-employed or start an enterprise. They are acting with a clear sense of their purpose in the community. They must have the flexibility to respond effectively to the changing local demands and act in pursuit of broad policy outcomes such as sustainable employment. Such flexibility and clarity of purpose at the front-line is especially vital during recession.

Sector response

Alison Kaye

Director, Work Based Learning Alliance

129. Alison represents a regional network of work-based learning providers, including colleges, private companies and third-sector providers. It works with the LSC, Jobcentre Plus, London Councils (the umbrella body for the 32 London boroughs), the individual London boroughs and other partners.
130. How do we align demand and supply in an integrated service, in a model now running on an austerity basis? At the moment, many aspects of this system remain undeveloped, or do not operate in an effective way.
131. Alison gave the example of a programme aimed at getting the newly unemployed back into, or at least ‘close to’, the labour market. Providers are judged according to how many people they get back into work. However, the job must be tied to a Level 2 NVQ. This is a ‘*real stumbling block*’ – the provider simply does not get paid for an outcome where a person gets into a job, but lacks this qualification. In another case, the LSC commissions a programme, but Jobcentre Plus determines who is eligible, meaning providers have to persuade Jobcentre Plus assessors to send applicants on to an external programme.
132. How do policy funding guidelines drive programmes? What programmes do we actually need? What is the role of the Mayor of London and the London Skills and Employment Board? There is a need for these regional bodies in London to play a key strategic role informed by knowledge of skills needs and gaps including up to date labour market intelligence, and the demand for skills and the supply of labour. We need awareness of skills, employment, social needs, and labour markets. We need to know what skills and apprentices are needed where, and how London’s ‘*global mission*’ creates jobs.
133. Alison stressed that providers need to develop ‘*evidence-based policy*’, for central and regional government to base policy on evidence, and to work more closely with providers in developing policy. This is a practice they had once been adept at but which has since declined.
134. ‘*Funding is driving the current raft of programmes*’, rather than individuals’ needs or skills needs. Regionally the LSC, Jobcentre Plus and London Development Agency are now working more closely together but continuity is lost between the regionally strategic commissioning and the actual operational delivery. Because there are so many programmes and initiatives, there ‘*is a high risk of double funding*’. Stringent rules keep many benefits recipients out of training.

135. The demand-led approach poses problems when dealing with the unemployed. If providers only respond to employer needs, then they run the risk of not meeting the requirements of the jobless. Practically speaking, there is little learner choice in the system, and provision is very fragmented. Providers who can offer a route into employment can offer more choices, and better meet individual needs. Alison added that providers should prepare to receive more unemployed high-skilled professionals, and that many of these people might be re-trained to take jobs in the learning and skills sector itself (as assessors, for example). However, we need more information about the new unemployed. The unemployed group is now broader than the long-term unemployed – a more heterogeneous group – and this needs to inform practice (for example, to avoid the outcome of a job with a level 2 NVQ qualification attached referred to above).
136. Finally, Alison asked how providers can assess returns on investment and measure outcomes. By sector? By region? We need more models of partnership and collaboration between institutions, and we should study our existing networks and the relationships between work-based learning providers and Jobcentre Plus. She noted that larger contractors on Jobcentre Plus projects will need the local expertise of smaller providers/subcontractors.

Seminar three: Beyond the recession – preparing for the upturn

What do we mean by a more “strategic, agile and demand-led employment and skills system”?

Michael Davis

Director of Strategy and Performance, UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)



137. Michael began by giving a short history of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills which was formed in April 2008, and is the successor to the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the National Employment Panel.
138. In April 2009, the commission launched *Ambition 2020*, an analysis of the employment, jobs and productivity challenges facing the British economy. The document sets out the ambition and therefore the challenges for the UK to become a top eight country in the world on jobs, skills and productivity.
139. Although skills attainment has massively improved over the last decade, this improvement has not yet been sufficient to raise the United Kingdom to what the commission defines as ‘*world class skills*’ (namely, being among the top eight in skills attainment among the 30 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD). Nor does it seem likely the UK will be in the top eight by 2020. Michael suggested that business as usual, or doing what we do, or simply just trying harder will not be enough. The question is ‘*what do you do differently*’ to reach that top eight?
140. He also noted that the current system will face real term financial ‘*squeezes*’ in the near future – or, more bluntly, heavy ‘*cuts*’. The challenge therefore is how do we energise an employment and skills system to achieve, bigger and better for less?
141. The UK Commission has five aspects to its overall remit, and Michael emphasised two which are of particular interest to his role and this discussion:
- providing advice on policy and delivery; and
 - challenging performance and performance management within Government itself.

142. Turning to explaining the diagram¹³ about what it might mean to have a strategic, agile and demand-led employment and skills system Michael first questioned the use of the term ‘*demand-led*’ in relation to the funding of provision in the sector. He is not in any way against the principle of demand-led, but what is currently practised differs from what most elementary students of economics understand demand to be. Demand is both a desire to own and a willingness to pay for something.
143. To be demand-led then is to respond to the desires of customers who pay for the service they receive. In the current arrangements demand is a series of pre-defined offers and rarely is the customer paying the full market rate. This is not just playing with words - it matters because policy is also addressing market failures or a lack of responsiveness which stem from a poor understanding of what real demand is. Therefore in terms of publicly-funded provision a more honest approach would be to talk about improving responsiveness to an offer that we want to be shaped by the needs of the labour market.
144. Therefore we are really talking about a system which is strategic, agile and responsive. Responsiveness could be judged by calling a provider at 11:00 in the morning and gauging the speed and helpfulness of their response. We cannot change the degree of responsiveness at 10.50 in the morning – the organisation is either responsive or not. Thus an ‘*agile*’ system is one with the capacity in the medium term to respond to the unforeseen.
145. There is no certainty in the economy, and no foolproof forecasting. A learning provider must be able to respond to evolving change, and ‘*the system’s health can be better measured by examining its responsiveness than its ability to forecast the future*’. The system does need intelligence about broad economic trends, i.e. that which ‘*is likely to happen*’ – but success is really about how providers respond to this data. Michael related the key concepts of the system to a timeframe – being ‘*demand led*’ is about responding to the present; being ‘*agile*’ is about dealing with the medium-term future: and being ‘*strategic*’ is about dealing with the longer term.
146. The UK Commission has a five-point strategy for creating a world-class employment and skills system (and Michael stressed that the UK Commission was focusing on employment and skills, a ‘*whole workforce development approach*’), which will feature in its 2010 review of the skills system. The consultation does not worry about structures, which will inevitably be subject to change over the coming months, but instead focuses on key principles. The system should define its ‘*success criteria*’ by means of five key qualities:
- ambition – that is, it should continually encourage individuals to learn, progress and succeed;
 - alignment – where the skills system works to boost employment and the employment services seek to improve skills levels;
 - accountability – especially to consumers, by using their feedback to drive up standards, as businesses do;

13 Available here <http://www.isis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/MichaelDavisLSIS.sflb>

- agility – including an ability to recognise geographic and demographic variations in employment levels; and
 - affordability – vital, given that, in real terms, we are likely to see a real squeeze on public expenditure for employment and skills support.
147. UKCES will open a consultation on this strategy in the autumn of 2009 in a series of pilot areas. Michael and UKCES want people to explore the ‘*shared agenda*’, and build a ‘*whole coalition that sees value in integration*’.
148. Michael announced that UKCES was publishing that afternoon (7 July 2009) an open letter¹⁴ on the second stage of simplification of the employment and skills system, focusing on giving employers readier access to provision. The UK Commission is now seeking ‘*more substantial changes*’ than it did in its 2008 paper on the subject. The letter poses three key questions:
- what are the most appropriate targets, measures and incentives to ensure that publicly funded employment and skills services deliver sustainable outcomes in jobs, skills and productivity?
 - given significant pressure on future public expenditure, how can we simplify public funding streams to lever substantially greater investment in workforce development from employers and individuals and to reduce administrative costs within the system?
 - what three measures are most likely to simplify complexity of organisations, processes and initiatives in order to maximise the value of public investment in frontline delivery?
149. More simply, Michael asked ‘*what are the headline changes we need to move forward?*’ He noted that there will always be people who excel despite struggling against the system, but Michael wants to make that struggle unnecessary. He finished by calling on providers to participate in the commission’s consultations, and its plans to build a bigger, better but sustainably affordable employment and skills system.

14 Available here http://www.ukces.org.uk/upload/pdf/Simplification_Letter_07%2007%2009.pdf

Responsiveness through innovation – creating the conditions for innovation flow

Dr Su Maddock

Director, Whitehall Innovation Hub



150. Su has a varied work portfolio having worked in local government, charities, universities, central government and across the public service. Her agency, the Innovation Hub, was created in 2007 within the National School of Government, to encourage civil servants to be more responsive to innovation.
151. Many parts of the public services have seen great improvement in recent years, and there has been great progress in systems reform. However, it is proving harder to make individuals more responsive to innovation or to citizen opinion.
152. Central government itself can be very obstructive to innovation which is by its nature outside of everyday practice. Innovation demands responsiveness to fresh approaches not yet registered by those monitoring standard and existing practice. In other words current government process and practice often creates a barrier to those trying out new ways of working or fresh approaches to problems. The Hub was set up to stimulate responsiveness to innovation in central government and is closely connected to the Transforming Government agenda. The strategy is outlined in the Hub's brochure¹⁵.
153. Su went on to give several examples of how the central government's rigidity impedes innovation. She cited the Eden Project¹⁶, a botanical garden complex in Cornwall. It has proved to be an enormous boon to the local economy, and is developing a learning and skills unit focused on geothermal energy¹⁷. Each time the project attempts to forge a partnership or sign a contract with the government, it faces the same barriers to raising funds and unrealistic timescales faced by innovators in all sectors. The government never alters its approach, no matter how successful the Eden Project proves itself to be in Cornwall i.e. generating over £900,000,000 – government systems do not evolve.
154. In the mental health system, Su noted a similarly rigid mindset. Revisiting a mental health facility where she had worked in the 1970s, she was shocked to find that the staff's attitude towards the patients had changed little in the intervening years, even though the treatments employed were often quite different. The employees still focused on '*custody, rather than care*', and evinced little empathy for their charges, or any understanding that they might need education or skills. The patients '*are treated with cotton wool*', and no one discusses their lives or aspirations.

15 Available here <http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/downloads/28283InnovationHub7.pdf>

16 <http://www.edenproject.com/>

17 Energy produced by harnessing the heat content of the Earth itself. According to Wikipedia, the Earth conducts about 40 terawatts (trillions of watts) of energy to its surface each day, though only a small portion of this is usable.

155. The new *'recovery approach'* to inpatient mental health services tries to focus on life goals and aspirations, and is gaining ground in the United States and New Zealand, but attitudes here have been slow to change. More positively, the forthcoming paper on mental health will talk a lot about *'recovery'* as an alternative approach in mental health services. The Hub and the Sainsbury Mental Health Trust will be publishing a paper on *'How to implement the recovery approach'* in the autumn as this approach is very transferable to other sectors, including learning and skills.
156. Innovation, Su said, is about people, not about building markets or systems. It is about working with consumers and communities. She asked how we can shift the policy system to encourage innovation and responsiveness at the front line, and support services that are already succeeding at innovating and meeting consumer needs. Su also noted that we don't often ask what it means to be responsive.
157. Su went on to discuss the example of South Tyneside Council, where Irene Lucas the chief executive, organised her training and systems around the key problems in her local area, rather than starting a *'generic change programme'*. The latter system, widely used in the Civil Service, tries to effect change without giving a rationale for it, and is thus unlikely to succeed. We must *'make sense of innovation in terms of the problems we are trying to solve'* if we are to embed innovation as a practice in the public services. Once we have determined why we want to innovate, purposeful creativity and innovation can follow.
158. Su also said that there was little equal exchange between local partnerships and the central government about locality or place-based innovation or how to rebalance government. To compensate for this the Hub has established a Vertical Network¹⁸, that connects key local players with those civil servants most likely to be able to solve their problems and advance local goals (for example, if local leaders wish to work on planning, she would link them with the requisite civil servants at the Department for Communities and Local Government). The Hub is also developing New Public – Media and Innovation, with case studies on people who have developed innovative approaches at the local level.
159. Many civil servants find it difficult to acknowledge that there is no weakness in listening and gathering intelligence from others in the regions and in services. The policy world is too insulated within central government and seals itself off from the rest of the public sector, a barrier that must be breached. We need to change the way government works before we start fixing the system as a whole.
160. In its second year the Hub is now working on the role of senior civil service in transformation and innovation – and welcomes those from the learning and skills sector who would like to be involved in the Hub's community of practice Vertical Network which meets quarterly.

18 To find out more about the vertical network, contact Ben Robinson ben.robinson@nationalschool.gsi.gov.uk

Sector response

Helen Groves

Chief Executive Officer, Humber Learning Consortium¹⁹



161. Helen spoke for the Humber Learning Consortium, which acts as a *'distribution conduit for the third sector'* in the Humber, liaising between large contractors and third sector providers. It acts as a *'portal of access'*, distributing money on behalf of the large contractors so that the smaller third sector bodies can then provide services. The consortium had a turnover of £1 million in 2007, and £6.2 million as of June 2009.
162. Helen began by giving an overview of the third sector, which she joined only two years ago (she previously worked in an FE college). She defined her sector as a group of *'independent organisations with social, environmental or cultural aims'*, which re-invest their fiscal surpluses rather than distribute them as profit. She dispelled the notion that it is staffed solely by volunteers. Indeed, 2.2 per cent of the British workforce is employed in the third sector. One-third of its workers have degrees, a higher proportion than in the public or private sectors.
163. Most third sector bodies are roughly the size of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with more than half of the sector's workforce employed by bodies with a staff of 25 or fewer.
164. The third sector is *'creeping on to the radar of government policy'*. Whitehall is starting to recognise the sector's community focus, and is mandating that the public sector either give more contracts to third-sector providers, or at least consider them for contracts and consult with them (though this consultation is often perfunctory). There are also a number of new funds designed to expand capacity, support mergers and otherwise supply the third sector.
165. Working with the public sector is not without its obstacles. The government has moved away from strings-free grants to a commissioning model, which requires intensive monitoring and thus a heavy burden of paperwork and bureaucracy. This is especially difficult for a small charity to process. There is no *'proportionality'* in contracting – the same reporting requirements apply for a £6,000 contract as for a £16 million one. The consortium tries to act as a *'buffer'* between the centre's bureaucratic demands and the small provider.
166. Until recently, funding for the third sector was based on annual contracts – i.e. it lasted for one year, making it hard to hire permanent staff or establish financial security. Third sector bodies often must wait several months for large contracts to be approved and signed, growing poorer in the meantime as economies of scale rarely exist. The sector also suffers from staff shortages, especially of specialised human resource specialists and finance professionals who have experience of charities and community groups.

19 Slides of Helen's presentation are available here <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/HelenGrovesLSISpresentation7July.sflb>

167. Third sector enterprises are *'very good collaborators'*, Helen said, with a strong community perspective and a *'holistic view'* of the needs of those who use their services. She said it could help colleges *'meet their community commitments'*.
168. There is anxiety in the third sector about the dissolution of the LSC, which was seen as a champion of charities and other groups in the third sector. The third sector does not have the same strong relationship with local authorities for the delivery of learning services.
169. The third sector is now focusing on employability, though many of its clients will not make it into sustainable employment in the short term. However, she noted that volunteering can be a valuable stepping stone to a job.
170. The future is likely to see more *'intelligent funding'*, delivering more for less. Helen said we need to change ways of working, better understand the supply chain and recognise that the public sector will seek adaptability and flexibility from its partners – *'qualities the third sector has in spades'*. The third sector looms large in government policy – 80 per cent of the Big Lottery Strategy's budgeted funds a total of £2.8 billion, will go to the third sector. The third sector is becoming a key player, but bureaucracy could make it hard for it to deliver responsive provision and may snuff out the sector's unique selling point.
171. Helen finished by asking: What can we do for each other? How can other providers exploit the third sector's unique ability to benefit the community?

Sector response

Andy Wilson

Principal, Westminster Kingsway College



172. Andy focused on the skills strategy for the future in his presentation, the last one of the day. The last skills strategy was centred on the Leitch Report, which was a popular strategy. But the government's, funding-led, implementation of that strategy left little leeway for providers or employers requiring subsidised training and was not particularly popular. The government's plans, based on increasing the number of qualifications attained, did not improve skills, because it mostly accredited existing skills. The strategy, despite recent reforms to make it more flexible, is '*unfocused and unsustainable*'.
173. What should the new skills strategy be? We must allow the supply side to innovate. But we skate around the difference between '*demand-led*' and '*needs-led*'. The first is about fulfilling customer desires (which Leitch backed), but the second is about meeting Government-defined needs. We need to carefully distinguish between the two concepts. Demand shifts according to the economic climate – right now, there is more demand for older workers, and less for younger ones.
174. The New Industry, New Jobs²⁰ paper gave evidence of joined-up thinking, but it too defines needs. Not all of its priorities can be met within the projected budgets, and they can't all be funded in the same way. Nor does New industry, new jobs provide a completely clear picture of the system – the funding system is still opaque.
175. In some cases, the Government's rules sabotage its own directives. Westminster Kingsway is training apprentices for the central government. All well and good, but the government department clients want apprentices aged 25 and over, for whom there is little funding.
176. The new system must be less restrictive, meaning it must be less focused on full, big qualifications, as a qualifications-based system is highly restrictive. It must stop mandating that providers join partnerships (though Andy did not oppose partnership work in principle).
177. The system should be stable, though Andy doubted we would see stability. He did, however, think we could achieve '*surety*', which he defined as possessing a clear and simple funding stream over an extended period. He noted the many capital projects were left abandoned or severely reduced due to the exhaustion of a capital funding scheme which had promised to rebuild the whole sector, and the tale of the London Apprenticeship Company, which the LSC have provided significant financial support for a business based on growth in apprenticeships – however the number of apprenticeships was capped within weeks of support being granted.

20 http://www.dius.gov.uk/~media/publications/N/new_industry_new_jobs

178. Andy noted that innovation was impeded by micromanagement from the centre, including the LSC. This was especially true for large providers. The learning and skills system also tends to harshly punish what it perceives to be failure, while innovation can only flourish in a '*no-blame culture*'. The Association of Colleges (AoC) is developing a manifesto including a section on skills strategy, which aims to secure more space for innovation.

Appendix – Seminar participants

Participant	Job title	Organisation
Aidan Relf	Communications Advisor	Association of Learning Providers
Alan Tuckett	Chief Executive	NIACE
Alastair Thomson	Principal Advocacy Officer	NIACE
Alison Kaye <i>Keynote speaker</i>	Director	Work Based Learning Alliance
Andrew Abaza	Head of Research and Development	Proskills UK
Andy Wilson <i>Keynote speaker</i>	Principal	Westminster Kingsway College
Ann Robinson OBE	Board Member	LSIS
Anna Labedzka	Executive Officer (Policy and Research)	Richmond Adult Community College
Anna Nsubuga	Policy Advisor, Business and Skills Directorate	DIUS
Ben Margulies	Policy Research Officer	LSIS
Beth Maloney	Director of Policy, Research and Strategy	Oaklands College
Bobbie McClelland <i>Keynote speaker</i>	Deputy Director, Skills Funding Agency Transition Directorate	DIUS
Brenda Sheils	Principal	Solihull College
Caroline Mager	Executive Director, Policy and Strategic Intelligence	LSIS
Cathy Ellis	Director of Harnessing Technology in FE and Skills Improvement and Leadership	Becta
Chris Hughes CBE	Chair	Learning and Skills Network
Chris Jeffery	Managing Director	Academy of Training
Christina Conroy OBE <i>Keynote speaker</i>	Principal and Chief Executive	Richmond Adult Community College, and member LSIS Council

Participant	Job title	Organisation
Christine Tyler	College Specialist	Association of School and College Leaders
Colin Kerr	Director, Finance and Resources	Learning and Skills Network
Dame Ruth Silver DBE	Principal and LSIS Chair	Lewisham College
David Shaw Keynote speaker	Head of Policy, Economic Impact Unit	DWP
Diana Watson	Marketing Director	LSIS
Ed Sallis	Principal and Chief Executive	Highlands College
Elaine McMahon	Principal and CEO	Hull College
Fiona Price Keynote speaker	Director of Skills and Migration	BERR
Garth Clucas HMI	Assistant Divisional Manager	Ofsted
Graham Hoyle OBE	Chief Executive and LSIS Council Chair	Association of Learning Providers
Graham Moore OBE	Principal	Stoke-on-Trent College
Helen Groves Keynote speaker	Chief Executive Officer	Humber Learning Consortium
Helen Hammond	Head of Service	Community Education Lewisham
Helen Pettifor	Executive Director, Provider Development (Leadership)	LSIS
Iain Murray	Senior Policy Officer (Learning and Skills)	Trades Union Congress
Ian Ashman	Principal	Hackney Community College
Ian Mulheirn	Director	Social Market Foundation
Jane Williams	Executive Director for FE, Skills and Regeneration	Becta
John Landeryou Keynote speaker	Director of Learning, Quality and Systems Directorate	DIUS

Participant	Job title	Organisation
John Stone	Chief Executive	Learning and Skills Network
Jon Bennett		Department for Communities and Local Government
Jonathan Todd	Consultant	Europe Economics
Julia Bennett	Policy Manager	Improvement and Development Agency
Julian Gravatt	Director of Funding and Development	Association of Colleges
Karen Grist	Deputy Principal	NYCPE
Keith Brooker	Board Member	LSIS
Kevin Ford	Chief Executive	FPM Training
Liz Aitken	Programme Director	LSIS
Marilyn Hawkins	Principal	Barnet College
Mary Heslop	Vice Principal, Strategy	Warwickshire College
Michael Davis Keynote speaker	Director of Strategy and Performance	UK Commission for Employment and Skills
Michael Stansfield	Senior Policy Adviser	BERR
Mike Emmerich Keynote speaker	Chief Executive	Commission for the New Economy
Nadine Cartner	Head of Policy	Association of College Managers
Paul Head Keynote speaker	Principal (and LSIS Board member)	College of North East London
Paul Holme Keynote speaker	Economic Response Director	LSC
Paul Wright-Anderson	Audit Manager	National Audit Office
Peter Davies	Principal	City Lit
Peter Grigg	Head of Policy and Research	Make Your Mark

Participant	Job title	Organisation
Rachel McKellar	Regional Apprenticeship Director	National Apprenticeship Service
Raj Patel	Assistant Director of Research and Policy	Learning and Skills Network
Participant	Job title	Organisation
Richard Chambers	Principal	Lambeth College
Roger McClure	Chief Executive	LSIS
Satwant Deol	Director of Planning	Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College
Simon Beer		National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
Simon Jack Chair	Business News Presenter	BBC
Stella Mbubaegbu CBE	Principal	Highbury College
Stephen Bartle	Director of New Business	Learning and Skills Network
Su Maddock Keynote speaker	Director	Whitehall Innovation Hub
Sue Rimmer	Principal	South Thames College
Sujinder Sangha	Principal and Chief Executive	Stockton Riverside College
Toni Fazaeli	Chief Executive	Institute for Learning

Please note details listed are those at the time of the seminars and details may have changed.

Policy and strategic intelligence



Caroline Mager is the executive director: policy, research and strategic intelligence at LSIS. Caroline designed the content of this and previous LSIS policy seminar series, and authored the associated reports and seminar programme notes.

Caroline has worked in a range of education and policy development roles, including NIACE and the Further Education Unit, Sir Ron Dearing's 16-19 Review Team and the Learning and Skills Development Agency, where she was appointed director of policy and communications.

She worked on the formation of the Quality Improvement Agency as director designate, communications and strategy until its launch in April 2006, before joining the Centre for Excellence in Leadership as director of strategic policy.

Policy and strategic intelligence services

To function effectively in a rapidly changing sector, effective leaders need access to sound analysis of government policy for the medium to long term. The LSIS policy service provides authoritative and reliable policy scanning and analysis services for the sector. We also host regular policy seminars to consider and develop understanding of current and emerging policy.

Who is it for?

Leaders and managers at all levels in the sector, partner organisations and sector associations.

What is involved?

Policy seminars

Throughout the year, we host invitation-only seminars for leaders in the learning and skills sector to examine and discuss policy developments facing the sector. For example, this series of seminars we conducted in the spring and summer of 2009 around FE's role in the financial crisis, examining the sector's crucial support for employment and skills strategies to mitigate the effects of the recession and prepare for the upturn.

We also publish reports of the seminars, to record the discussion for wider dissemination, track areas of consensus and of disagreement, and capture the rationale and narratives of the debate. These reports are circulated widely and published on the policy pages of the LSIS website.

Policy updates

We produce a regular digest of policy developments and initiatives and email this to more than 1300 subscribers. The digests cover a wide span of policy from our own sector and from other areas of public sector policy that may become significant for the learning and skills system.

Brief guides

We produce summaries of significant policy developments, reports and documents pertinent to the learning and skills sector to raise awareness and make them accessible to a wide audience.

Examples include:

- the Cabinet Office reports, Excellence and Fairness and Unleashing Aspiration
- the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' Ambition 2020
- Whole systems go! Improving leadership across the whole public service system published by the National Schools of Government.

Feedback from policy seminars

“Outstanding chairs, excellent presenters . . . [the team] is superb at taking notes and summarising the issues ... whole way seminar is conducted is very high quality.”

“So many seminars, workshops, conferences are at a superficial level, so not particularly useful. This series of seminars has been absolutely unique in this respect.”

Feedback on policy updates and brief guides

“Thanks for this. Reading through these are always very good value in terms of my time and this one is no exception!”

Further information

For full information and to access publications visit www.lsis.org.uk/policy

Signup to receive updates from the policy team at www.lsis.org.uk/policyupdates

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Learning and Skills Improvement Service

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service aims to accelerate the drive for excellence in the learning and skills sector, building the sector's own capacity to design, commission and deliver improvement and strategic change. This will help realise our vision that every learner acquires the skills, knowledge and appetite for learning, living and working and that every provider is valued by their community and employers for their contribution to sustainable social and economic priorities.

Strategic Ambitions, which we published in July 2009, demonstrates how we will contribute to delivering core improvement principles and sets out our new ways of working to engage the sector in everything we do to make LSIS a truly sector-led organisation. You can find this document and other information about LSIS activities and services at www.lsis.org.uk

Disability equality policy

LSIS is committed to promoting equality for disabled people and we strive to ensure that all our communication and learning materials are available in various formats including large font, audio or braille. Please let us know if you consider yourself disabled and require reasonable adjustments made to support you.