

## POLICY WATCH

2008/42

8 July 2008

### A glance down the 'births, marriages and deaths' columns of the skills system reveals considerable comings and goings

Once again the question of the complexity of the skills system in England is becoming an issue. Questioned recently by the [DIUS Select Committee](#), Chris Humphries, chief executive of the [UK Commission for Employment and Skills](#) admitted that *"I don't think there's an employer in the land who understands what the new systems are."* His organisation has begun a labour of Hercules to tally up the various bodies, initiatives and mechanisms that the Government has unleashed as it attempts to drive up skill levels in this country. According to some reports, it has reached 101.

Yet is the skills system really as complicated as is often made out; is this just a perception, a piece of folk lore that has become accepted wisdom, an excuse for not engaging? Certainly the Government is claiming it is doing all it can to 'hide the wiring' by providing intermediaries like brokers to make it easier for employers to take the plunge and directing funding where possible straight into the hands of employers. Equally not all employers are bemused; *"I don't buy all this stuff about the difficulties employers are having,"* the managing director of Hospitality Industry training was reported as saying last week.

Either way three points seem pertinent. First, part of the problem is that the Government keeps designing more and more schemes and solutions for employers no doubt in a genuine belief that this is what they want even if this is not necessarily what they have asked for. *"The Government has become one gigantic fidget"* as the columnist Simon Jenkins recently put it. Second, to rub salt into the fidgeting the Government never seems to clear one deck before it launches another, hence the feeling of overload. And third, employers are not homogenous groups, they vary by size, region, output and so on and so trying to fix a system for employers in general is always going to fail to satisfy some.

There is perhaps a fourth point and that is that the skills system is not static, it is constantly evolving to keep pace with changing demands and needs. This may be frustrating but is necessary. To quote Chris Humphries again, *"almost every country in the OECD is undertaking a review programme at the moment to try and understand how to ensure that their education and training system keeps pace with the rate of industry change in order to ensure their competitiveness."*

So a little bit of evolution may be necessary but a glance down the 'births, marriages and deaths' columns of the learning and skills system in England just for this year alone shows how rapid such evolution can be.

In terms of births, at least 9 new bodies have either arrived or had news of their arrival announced this year. Some, it's true, were conceived before this year but

their presence has been felt during this year. In alphabetical order these are: the Adult Advancement and Careers Service (AACCS;) the Joint Committee for Qualifications Approval (JCQA) for 14 - 19 qualifications; the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS;) the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS;) the independent regulator (Ofqual;) the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA;) the Skills Funding Agency (SFA;) the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES;) the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA.)

As for marriages, as elsewhere in society, these have been fewer and farther between. Unsurprisingly, there's more interest in creating a new body than in joining the knot between two existing ones. The Single Voice effectively brings together in harmony a number of partners including the Information Authority and the Bureaucracy Group; LSIS emerges from the loins of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) while the return of Connexions with Local Authorities is more like re - igniting an old flame. In all fairness, a number of bodies do work very closely together such as the LSC and Jobcentre Plus but as separate rather than as married partners.

Some deaths have been announced during the year but in most cases the body concerned has gained an after life. Thus the QCA has transmuted into Ofqual and the QCDA, the SSDA into the UKCES, the LSC in due course and in a different form into the SFA and, has been mentioned, QIA and CEL are morphing into the LSIS. Most have gone with Government praise ringing in their ears; "*QCA has had 10 years of success and it is important that we build on that*" wrote the Government in its recent [Next Steps Report on Ofqual](#) and "*the LSC has hit all the targets the Government set it*" their line in the earlier [Raising Expectations](#) White Paper. Their spirit lives on.

Much of all this is part of the inevitable churn of life. What is arguably more alarming is the huge welter of initiatives and instruments constantly introduced into the system to make it perform better, quicker, more efficiently or more personally. These, while genuine in intent, add to the sense of turbulence particularly if the drive appears to be political exigency rather than defined need.

In the last month alone, we've had, for instance six 'structural' announcements covering the launch of a consultation on 'a new right to request time to train for employees in England,' the launch of another round of bids for National Skills Academies and the announcement of the first four sector compacts to drive forward sector specific training through Train to Gain. Also proposals to introduce a more "*empowering*" local planning model under Multi Area Agreements (MAA,) confirmation of further flexibilities in the Train to Gain scheme and a commitment to extend the City Strategy Pathfinder scheme until 2011.

We've had also four funding announcements, or in some cases re - announcements, including: an Apprenticeship Credit for 18+ year olds; an entitlement to free training at level 3 for 19 - 25 year olds; confirmation of a consultation to make skill development a condition of benefit receipt as part of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA;) and of the start of trialling of Skills Accounts in the South East and East Midlands this autumn.

Alongside have been an employer action plan for the Olympics, updates on the Skills Pledge and skill brokerage and the launch of the provider performance measurement tool. Didn't fidgety - gibbert have his hands cut off in the end?

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