

## POLICY WATCH

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### The UK Commission for Employment and Skills sets out its initial plan of work

Opening up talent has become one of the strongest drumbeats of the skills agenda this year. The phrase '*Unlocking talent*' crops up regularly in most skills speeches and has been used as the strapline for a number of recent Government initiatives in work - based learning. The Secretaries of State for DWP and DIUS respectively are becoming the Ant and Dec of a nationwide talent search.

It's an interesting shift in emphasis; away from a rather singular pursuit of counting qualification 'stock' level by level towards trying to open up talent wherever it might be. Leading this is the '[Talent Challenge](#)' which is being led by Business in the Community who are working closely with business and others to "*harness the talent of every individual in the country.*" Sir Stuart Rose, who is chairing this work, is reporting directly to the Prime Minister and DIUS and a series of activities is planned in support of it.

The '*Talent Challenge*' is one of ten or so special projects listed in the recently released *Business Plan 2008/9* from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The intention, according to the Plan, is to test out a Talent Map later this year, "*a web - based system for employers to enable them to quickly identify how they may best engage with the skills and employment system.*" The map sits neatly with a number of other significant projects being undertaken by the Commission over the year including notably a '*Simplification Project,*' "*a debate on simplification of the post - 19 organisational landscape from the perspective of employers and learners*" with a progress Report going to the Prime Minister this November and an '*Employability Skills Project,*' due to produce in September a definition of employability skills with a good practice guide to boot.

Overall this new [Business Plan](#), which covers the Commission's first year and provides the context for a more long - term Strategic Plan next year, identifies four core areas of activity. The first is advisory work, which includes the sorts of projects mentioned above along with research and policy analysis, much of it feeding into the annual '*State of the Nation*' Report to Parliament. Secondly, executive activity which picks up much of the work previously undertaken by the SSDA including notably the re - licensing and performance management of the SSCs and the UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme. Thirdly, building the presence and reputation of the Commission, clearly vital for its long - term credibility and profile. And fourthly, giving the organisation legs, establishing its processes and systems so that it can operate effectively.

The Commission has kicked off with considerable good will on all sides but at a time when things generally seem particularly difficult. The skills system is suffering from *initiativitis*; the qualification system is grappling with some new big new changes; employers, according to the latest LSC National Employers Skills Survey are spending more on training but facing difficult economic times; and Leitch has



yet to make an impact. *"So far we have not seen enough to give it a definitive yes,"* as Professor Alison Woolf told the Select Committee last month. As the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reported in its annual survey of learning and development earlier this year, *"over 53% of organisations say their learning and development work has not yet been influenced by the Government's post Leitch skills agenda."*

The Commission has been set five priorities by spring 2009 under its April Grant Letter and a budget of £78,239k with which to achieve them. These priorities include: *"publication of a 'State of the Nation' Report assessing progress towards making the UK a world leader in employment and skills by 2020"* with the first one due in March 2009; sorting out SSC re - licensing; offering advice on how the skills system could be better organised and on how to make the skills and welfare system more accessible; and preparatory work on the 2010 reviews. These reviews have already been announced and will be looking at whether there should be a legal entitlement to workplace training and whether more radical change is needed to integrate skills and employment services.

Each of these priorities is reflected in the Business Plan but arguably most interest will lie in three areas; SSC re - licensing, system simplification and how far things around skills and learning feel better. The Commission may be able to do more about the first two than the last one.

[SSC re -licensing](#) is just beginning and will be completed by December 2009. The *'After Leitch'* Select Committee Inquiry has spent considerable time recently discussing SSCs although it's now generally accepted that they have a hugely important role to play in the skills agenda in the future. Indeed the re - licensing Prospectus which was also released by the Commission this week confirms that *"there is no intention of embarking on wholesale re - structuring of the network,"* rather the aim is to health check SSCs for the challenges ahead.

SSCs have been granted *"a new, clearer three part remit"* that takes in raising employer engagement, demand and investment in skills; ensuring authoritative labour market information for their sectors; and developing national occupational standards and ensuring qualifications meet employer needs. To be re -licensed, an individual SSC will need to be satisfactorily graded against four themes; being employer led and strategically and operationally effective; articulating the sector voice on skill and qualification needs; providing *'compelling'* skills solutions; and identifying clear targets and impacts. The promise is that this *"does not need to be a long drawn out process."*

SSCs have a limited pot of money, just over £50m annually, but are playing a big role in the qualification business. Apart from prioritising vocational qualifications for funding, in England at least they approve Apprenticeship frameworks, develop National Occupational Standards, support and influence 14 - 19 qualifications and help drive up quality through measures such as the Training Quality Standard.

On system simplification, the Commission's hands may be somewhat tied by the recent Machinery of Government changes which have set the position at least initially, and by the general lack of appetite for further upheaval. Where the Commission may well score is in its projects on trying to simplify access to the system for users. A Report on *'Customer Journeys'* for instance is due next March. It's in work like this where the feel good factor may surface.

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