Moving from a Learning and Skills Sector to an Equitable, Effective and Inclusive Learning System

Ken Spours
Richard Steer
Ann Hodgson

Institute of Education,
University of London


This is work in progress. Please do not cite without written permission from the lead author.
ABSTRACT

Based on findings from the ESRC TLRP research project, ‘The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector’ (2004-2007), this paper is concerned with the future of the learning and skills sector (LSS). Reflecting on our findings we conclude that the early achievements of the LSS are being compromised by its mode of governance, which has shifted sharply in a neo-liberal direction over the last three years. The sector is now at a crossroads as the Government seeks to divide it along age lines and to marketise adult skills, moves that could threaten an all-through concept of lifelong learning. The paper argues that there is a potentially different direction of reform that can move the LSS towards a more effective and inclusive learning system, taking forward the idea of a unified sector envisaged by David Blunkett when the LSS was established in 2001. An inclusive learning system, based on a devolved social partnership approach to governance, accords closely with debates taking place more widely in local and regional government, thus making it a realisable alternative for change.

THE CASE FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO REFORM

At a time when practitioners in the LSS understandably complain about constant change imposed from above (Edward et al. 2007), it is essential to make a reasoned and evidence-based case for further reform. Equally important is the task of creating a different type of policy climate where the pace of change is more ‘temperate’ (Wallace and Hoyle 2005), and where the reform process is more participative, attempting, over a sustained period, to address systemic and deep-seated problems in education and training.

The paper argues for a move from the current LSS to an inclusive learning system because the sector appears to have gone as far as it can under its current system of governance and the early gains made with learner retention and achievement rates may not be sustainable. The stakes are even higher now that the Government has proposed to raise the education participation age to 18 (DfES 2007). There are also pressing issues of inclusion, with evidence that more marginalised young people and adults are still missing out on learning. At this point, we take issue with the Government’s precipitous plans to divide the organisation of learning on age lines and argue that we need a proper debate on how to build an inclusive system for lifelong learning originally envisaged in The Learning Age.

NEO-LIBERAL GOVERNANCE OF THE LSS

Our TLRP research, drawing on primary evidence from 131 policy interviews and 559 interviews in 24 learning sites in FE, adult and community learning and workplaces; suggests that the main problems facing the LSS arise from its neo-liberal governance.

---

1 The researchers wish to acknowledge the funding of ‘The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New LSS’ by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme – reference number RES 139-25-0105. This paper is derived from the final writing exercise of this TLRP Project and we, therefore, acknowledge the contribution of our other team members - Frank Coffield, Sheila Edward and Ian Finlay. For more detail on the findings of this Project, we refer readers to our book – Coffield et al. forthcoming.
The Government chose to govern by a hybrid regime comprising dominant and subordinate strands that Hall (2003) refers to as New Labour’s ‘double shuffle’. The dominant strand involves the continued use of new public management (NPM) - the restructuring of the public sector through privatisation and competition and drives to improve efficiency by means of performance auditing and measurement. The subordinate strand contains more social democratic aims (e.g. increasing public expenditure with a limited emphasis on inclusion and promoting citizen participation). These two agendas, operating together, have produced an adaptive form of neo-liberalism referred to as New Labour’s modernisation of governance and its reform of public services (Newman 2001).

The twin ‘drivers’ of policy – promoting a competitive economy and social inclusion – remained constant throughout our period of research although the former continues to dominate the latter. A competitive economy is seen as the route to inclusion. Moreover, the Government maintains that social democratic aims can be achieved by neo-liberal means. Key policy documents, for example, the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit publications on public service reform (PMSU 2006, 2007), assert that institutional competition promotes choice and choice benefits the disadvantaged.

While the policy drivers have remained relatively consistent, policy language, structures and initiatives shifted from 2003 onwards. Governance of the LSS moved from an area planning approach to a ‘top down market’ model, reliant on ‘contestability’ to drive up standards of provision and meet employer and learner ‘demand’ (see Hodgson et al. 2007 for more detail). This marketised phase – symbolized by the Government’s desire to move to a demand-led system - combines two forms of centralism; centrally constructed policy levers to drive through government priorities and now a centrally imposed ‘quasi-market’.

This top-down performance regime affected the governance of the LSS in three major ways:

- **Politics and constant change** - our research highlighted the different normative worlds of politicians and practitioners, in particular their different cultures and time-scales. Politicians are driven by a political logic; they are judged by Manifesto commitments, the need for quick results before the next General Election, and the demands of a 24-hour media, hungry for news. Hence the talk of ‘transformational change’, ‘quantum leaps’ and ‘step changes’; and the need for ‘hard’ evidence to demonstrate that change has taken place within the four-year period of an administration. The result has been an atmosphere of constant change and a tendency to use policy initiatives as a way of seeking the political upperhand.

- **Policy levers and unintended outcomes** - the system of policy levers, in particular, targets and performance measures, funding and inspection, produced unintended and negative outcomes because managers and practitioners responded to their demands in unpredictable ways.

- **Marketisation and privileging the employer voice** - while government rhetoric talks of learners being at the centre of the system, in policy terms this did not prove to be the case. Employers were seen as by far the most important partner and it was their needs that had to be satisfied if they were to be involved in what remains a voluntarist and increasingly marketised system.
These three features of neo-liberal governance appear to have compromised key features of the LSS - education performance, learning relationships, effectiveness and efficiency, inclusion and meeting needs at the local level.

- **Improved retention but problems with progression** - learner retention and the attainment of qualifications have improved steadily in the LSS (LSC 2006). We found, however, a significant degree of uncertainty with regards to progression. In ACL, wider funding cutbacks were narrowing provision for basic skills learners; in WBL, there was the dual problem of uncertain funding (because of the reliance on short-term initiatives) and limited learning opportunities within the workplace; while in FE, there were clearer progression pathways but low rates of progression between levels. Across all types of site in our research, learner progression was not as strong a focus as meeting retention and achievement targets.

- **Policy and learning relationships** - across all three groups of learners, the relationship with tutors emerged as being centrally important. Learners valued an experience that was different from that which they had experienced at school; in college, adult and community learning (ACL) and work-based learning (WBL) they found a relaxed and safe atmosphere, a culture of mutual respect, more one-to-one attention and (for the younger learners in particular) a relationship in which the students were treated as adults. However, policy does not overtly recognise this mutually dependent relationship and, instead, seeks to promote the concepts of learners as consumers and education institutions as providers of products for these consumers.

- **Transactions costs, effectiveness and efficiency** - accountability systems generated heavy ‘transactions costs’, as significant amounts of energy were diverted away from the organisation of learning to manage paperwork associated with targets, funding regimes and inspection. Funding in the Sector has more than doubled over the period, rising from £5 billions in 2001 to over £11 billions in 2007. However, this growth is slowing and may not be able to mask issues of efficiency, effectiveness and equity that had been hidden in a period of rapidly increasing budgets.

- **Targets, government policy and inclusion** - the focus on target-driven Level 1 and Level 2 achievements has led to an over-emphasis of provision for individuals who were close to achieving these levels, with neglect of people at Entry and Pre-Entry Level. Some managers in adult and community provision, sensing government priorities, closed down lower level provision in order to remain viable. We noted too how over-zealous pursuit of achievement targets can create accessible but mechanical and narrow forms of learning experiences. Learners might gain qualifications, but not the skills for sustained participation, progression and critical thinking.

- **A weakened approach to planning at the local level** - we found that the combined effects of voluntarism/marketisation and the top-down performance regime weakened the idea of local area planning. FE colleges in our research, for example, found that policy levers forced them focus on provision, which did not always match the needs of the local population (Spours et al. 2007). Nor are there strong incentives for local institutional collaboration, compared with those
that encourage competition (Hodgson and Spours 2006). Moreover, the lack of regulatory frameworks (e.g. licenses to practice), that embrace the young person, employers and the providers, means that education institutions find it difficult to respond to the needs of employment because of the lack of high-volume demand.

In summary, gains made by the LSS in terms of learner retention, achievement and improvements in the quality of some areas of provision have been significant but at a heavy cost. Following the Leitch Report (2006), the Government now proposes a ‘demand-led’ system for adult skills that could threaten institutional stability by deliberately creating financial uncertainty and undermining established relationships between providers and between providers and employers. It also wants to see the ‘education participation age’ raised to 18 (DfES 2007), although it is less clear how this aspiration can be fulfilled. In our view, therefore, it is time to take stock, to look at the evidence and debate different directions of change, rather than risk ‘running ever faster down the wrong road’ (Coffield 2007).

**TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING SYSTEM – FOUR PRINCIPLES**

The effects of the adaptive neo-liberal performance regime on the LSS and the Government’s new policy emphasis and ambitions, in our view, point to the need for a more systemic and democratic approach to reform based on clear principles, four of which we outline below. This is not political change for the sake of it but the call for a new settlement that aims to meet the needs of all learners; operated by new forms of governance involving a range of social partners with relationships based on openness, better communication between policy actors and practitioners and more trust in professional judgment. We think that such a system will have to focus resolutely on teaching, learning, progression and inclusion supported by social partnership and rebalanced governance relations.

**A learning system from 14+**

Since the late 1980s, most progressive education opinion has supported the idea of a 14+ education and training system. A coherent 14-19 phase, rather than at break at 16, has been seen as basis of a more inclusive upper secondary education in which learners can progress at their own pace as they make a transition to adult and working life (Hodgson and Spours 2003). At the same time, any break at 19 was also played down because of the principle of a more seamless path of lifelong learning. The idea of 14+ accords also closely with the realities of further education colleges and the work-based route where many, if not most learners, straddle the 19+ boundary. So it is somewhat of a mystery why the Brown Administration should suddenly decide to reinforce a new age division at 19. It certainly has not been openly debated and we are not sure it is helpful. Our starting point, therefore, for proposals for an inclusive learning system is that the boundary, and even this must be permeable, should be 14+. 
Teaching, learning and progression at the heart of the system

Having said that, an inclusive learning system would have to put teaching, learning and progression at the heart of all its activities and seek to reclaim a broad concept of education, which has disappeared from the titles of the three new Ministries (the Department for Children Schools and Families, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform).

We return to our central finding, namely, that students in three different settings (FE, ACL and WBL) reported that it was the relationship with tutors that was the key to their learning, progress and success. For learners of any age who had been poorly served by their schooling, a tutor who gave them respect, confidence and self-belief could help them achieve where in the past they had failed. This is a considerable achievement for tutors working with students whom few want to teach. Policy and institutional practice need to consider how to establish, maintain and enrich learner-teacher relationships. Our data suggest that policy needs to focus on supporting professional communities of practice and CPD, which are tailored to personal and team needs and emphasise capacity-building for the sector as a whole. In order to support these professional communities, policy has to offer greater trust, more local determination, more secure career structures and the time to innovate and take pedagogical risks. Tutors and managers need to be given the space to develop a shared concept of quality in terms of teaching and learning, which is subject to more local, as well as national, accountability.

We have already briefly described how the LSS has promoted participation but has been unable to secure adequate levels of progression. Learner progression is the key to success because it is through sustained achievement that learners are able to access higher levels of study and is particularly important for those who lost ground at school. Central to progression is the qualifications system for 14-19 year olds and adults. 14-19 qualifications are both divided and selective, with GCSEs and A Levels playing a major role in the sifting process. For nearly two decades, representatives of the education, research and policy communities have, in varying ways, argued for a more open, less divided, more cumulative approach to accrediting achievement which allows learners to move at their own pace - an approach known as ‘stage not age’. These were central features of the Tomlinson proposals for a unified diploma system (Working Group for 14-19 Reform 2004) and since then, an integrated architecture of an all-through a unified diploma system and an adult credit system has been published by NIACE (Hodgson et al. 2006).

Inclusion reinforced by equity

The LSS was originally intended to be a ‘level playing field’ but, despite high levels of investment, significant inequalities remain. The 13 per cent funding gap between school sixth forms and colleges has been reduced to eight per cent but staff in FE colleges are still paid significantly less than their counterparts in schools. Moreover, rewards, career prospects, conditions of service are all poorer in ACL and WBL than they are in FE. Learners also suffer inequalities, not only between schools and FE but also between qualifications levels, with those at higher levels receiving more resources that those lower down (Fletcher and Owen 2005). Creating an inclusive and equitable system will require investing far more at the lower levels where it is needed most. For
example, Entry, Level 1 and Level 2 courses should be funded as favourably as Level 3 courses in order to cope with the concentration of educational, financial, social and physical disadvantages suffered by such students.

An inclusive system has to be far more equitable if it is to make real inroads into disadvantage and it cannot restrict its view to education or training. As Lave and Wenger have argued, the problems of education ‘are not, at the most fundamental level, pedagogical’ (1991: 100). Educational reform needs to be part of a co-ordinated strategy of socio-economic policies to tackle persistent inequalities and to open up labour market opportunities. This is not just a social and cultural argument but also an economic one. The political architects of Nordic social cohesion suggest that more equitable societies are more productive because they harness the power of collaboration and trust to create competitive advantage and use labour market security to actually enhance flexibility (European Social Democrats 2006).

A social partnership approach to labour markets and skills

Part of this new settlement has to be a different relationship between government, employers, employees and their representatives. Employers are being asked by government to play an ever-increasing role in learning and skills (as well as in many other policy areas) and history suggests that voluntarist measures such as the Skills Pledge, launched in June 2007, whereby employers voluntarily commit their firm to invest in the skills of their employees, will not prove a success. The alternative is to treat employers as one of a range of social partners rather than giving them a privileged voice.

We suggest that the positive outcomes of the Care Standards Act 2000 should be recognised and licences to practise should be applied, as quickly as is practicable, across a range of sectors. This type of regulatory framework can bring social partners - employers, providers and learners - into a common pact to increase the demand for learning by communicating clear signals to all the key players. These include the qualifications and skills employers should demand; the level of qualification and skills learners have to achieve and the courses providers have to offer. This form of regulatory arrangement improves predictability in terms of planning provision locally, regionally and nationally. While apprenticeship was not a focus in our research, it is clear from the numerous studies (e.g. Fuller and Unwin 2003) and from the Nuffield 14-19 Review (e.g. Hayward et al. 2005), that a larger and more effective apprenticeship work-based route is probably the only way get anywhere near to 100 per cent participation up to the ages of 18 or 19.

REALISING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING SYSTEM - A DEVOLVED SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

We believe that the aims of an inclusive system have to be delivered by democratic (rather than neo-liberal) means if they are to succeed in providing a new progressive education settlement. A devolved social partnership model is arguably the most coherent response to the top-down marketised regime of the LSS. It also takes to its logical conclusion Government’s rhetoric of ‘devolution to the front line’ (HMT 2002).
We see devolved social partnership resulting from the fusion of two approaches to governance. The first is social partnership at the national level, based on the principle of power sharing between government and a range of national representatives, including employers, trade unions, professional associations and community organisations, as practised in the Nordic countries and the Republic of Ireland, where a wider range of partners, including the community, not only implement policies but also contribute to their formation (Boyd 2002). Social partnership, defined in this way, can be linked to a second principle: the civic republican ideal of positive freedom and democratic self-government (Devine et al. 2007), with its emphasis on citizen involvement, the promotion of social trust, civil society and local identity. Taken together, they suggest a more democratic set of relationships between national, regional and local governance with the accent on devolution and subsidiarity: ‘that unless there is a strong counter reason (usually with regard to equity) democratic institutions should be located as closely as possible to the people they represent’ (Lawson 2005: 28).

A new set of national, regional and local relationships

Devolved social partnership is not a remote and idealistic goal; it is already present in debates about how local government can be reinvigorated. Over the past 10 years, the concept of the ‘New Localism’ has emerged as a response to the complexities of modern governance and as a way of promoting democratic and civic renewal:

New Localism can be characterised as a strategy aimed at devolving power and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities, within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities (Stoker 2004: 2).

An integral part of this rebalancing of national and local is the growing importance of city/regions which are seen as both effective economic drivers and sources of identity, a point not lost on Mayor Ken Livingstone, who has taken control of a London-wide Employment and Skills Board and will actively seek to expand decision-making over skills in order to meet global challenges (LDA 2007). There has been progress in terms of legislation, although it is too early to assess its impact. The Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities (DCLG 2006), has been welcomed by supporters of the New Localism as a step forward (NLGN 2006). Within local government, there is also some evidence of devolution taking root in the development of ‘democratic services’ by some local and city councils (e.g. City of Birmingham 2007).

A new and slower culture of national politics

A learning system based on more power to regions and localities will require support from a new national political culture. Changes lower down require reform at the top. For example, we need a decisive break with the culture of constant interference and endless national initiatives, tied to ministerial careers fuelling what has been termed ‘momentum politics’ (Hyman 2005) and ‘policy busyness’ (Hayward et al. 2005). The slowing down of politics could provide the space for effective reform to take root and for a social partnership decision-making process to take place.
Moreover, within this different political culture and timescales, we see the possibility of a new form of leadership rather than micro-management. In the area of learning and skills, political leadership would involve communicating and explaining policy priorities, promoting equity and securing national standards. Confident leadership is not about drawing power more closely but actively giving it away. This means not only being serious about devolving powers to regions and localities but also distributing power within the centre of national politics. This includes a greater role for Parliament in policy-making, accompanied by a focus on parliamentary deliberation and the Select Committee system, around which there is significant cross-party agreement (Lawson 2005, Heald 2006).

**Policy frameworks to supersede policy levers**

Part of the process of devolution should be a radical reduction in the use of remote policy levers, currently employed to enforce professional compliance and competition between institutions. Top-down policy levers, which provided initial gains in performance but at significant cost should be replaced by what we term ‘policy frameworks’. Frameworks provide the ‘rules’ and ‘freedoms’ that stimulate collective practice between social partners and encourage local innovation. Our research suggests three other areas where policy frameworks might supersede policy levers:

*Targets.* We need to get rid of the micro-managed, target-driven and quantitative culture of accountability. An alternative approach is to see targets as broad aspirations and as areas of improvement rather than numerical entities tightly measured from above. Regions and localities could be asked to provide overall responses to the national ‘direction of travel’ by producing area-wide targets, generated bottom-up and based on collaboration between social partners, rather than delivering up specific ‘numbers’. Such a development would signal a significant degree of ‘translation’ of national policy to fit local circumstances and priorities and would bring a very different feel to the LSS.

*Funding.* Time and again, our interviewees called for greater stability and flexibility in national funding to meet local needs. Funding could be linked to more broadly based targets over a period of three years with more discretion as to how resources might be used to meet local need. An independent Committee of Enquiry recommended that ‘at least 20 per cent of colleges budgets should be at college discretion, with accountability for use after the event’ (NIACE 2005:4).

*A qualifications and credit framework.* Similar calls were made for a more flexible qualifications and credit framework to promote lifelong learning to supersede current inflexible arrangements. Such a framework could contain not only nationally recognised full awards but also units to be accumulated in a more incremental manner, some of which could be designed specifically to respond to local need.
The realignment of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)

A new political culture will also have to consider the role of NDPBs, such as the LSC, which have become an integral part of neo-liberal governance. The future of NDPBs is an emotive political topic with different approaches coming from Left and Right. The Right basically invented them in their current form; New Labour expanded their role and the Left, witnessed by debates in Wales (Hayward et al. 2006), would broadly like to see a ‘bonfire’ of them.

The LSC, despite its achievements, has been a regular focus of debate since its creation in 2001 and all the major political parties have voiced views on its future. The Conservatives have proposed the removal of the regional tier and the creation of a single national funding body more responsive to business needs (Heald 2006). The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, suggest a merger between the LSC and HEFCE into a funding and planning body that brings learning and skills and higher education together (Liberal Democrats 2006). With the publication of the Leitch Report, New Labour has embarked on a demand-led strategy and has yet to decide on the fate of the LSC. As we have seen, however, the Brown Administration’s splitting of the DfES means that the outlook for the LSC looks uncertain to say the least. One possibility, and we stress it is only one of several, is that the national LSC could eventually be merged with HEFCE; the regional LSC could be integrated with other regional bodies; and the local LSC partnership teams might join local authorities (LAs), now responsible for 14-19 education. This realignment would move some way towards a more democratic role for this particular NDPB. We also suggest that other quangos (e.g. QCA, QIA) are empowered to take a stronger two-way advisory role in relation to policy and practice, rather than being simply the transmitters of top-down policy.

Democratic accountability

The short life of the LSS has been dominated by accountability and any new system would have to be accountable in some way. The question is: in what way? Ranson (2006) suggests that the culture of accountability will have to be replaced by ‘the obligation to communicate with and explain to the public [which] is the foundation of a democratic polity because the authority and consent for public service derives from the public, and without that the legitimacy of the public sphere withers’ (213).

This should not be seen as a dilution of accountability. On the contrary, the concept of democratic accountability is demanding because of the need to answer for greater freedom of action locally, not only laterally to fellow social partners, but directly to the public at large. There would still be a need for accountability to national government, but we envisage it free from micro-management. If local partnerships had, for example, agreed three-year plans and these had been purchased by local and regional government, then those partnerships would have to account for themselves through explanation, dialogue and openness, rather than relying on authoritarian mechanisms of inspection and audit. In the final analysis, however, poor or unsatisfactory performance, if identified by peer review and rigorous inspection, should not be tolerated because the interests of learners are the over-riding concern.
Collaborative local and regional ecologies

It is tempting to think of the ‘local’ through the lens of local government, particularly given that powers over education up to 19 years are to be passed from the LSC to LAs. We need to think in different ways about the local, not just as an important administrative and democratically representative entity, but also as an ecological system. An ecological perspective attempts to conceptualise the multi-dimensional nature of learning beyond schooling (e.g. decisions about where to learn and how to get there; inter-dependent relations between providers and the influence of wider community, social and labour market factors). Such a perspective thus recognises the complexity of educational decisions and relationships that have become more complicated as a result of neo-liberal market reforms (Spours et al. 2007). It also provides the framework for professional and institutional collaboration, which could create the spaces for local deliberation of equity, innovation and capacity-building. Moreover, collaboration offers the possibility of more efficient use of scarce resources.

Educational relations do not always conform to local administrative boundaries. Thinking about different scalings of activities also helps conceptualise partnership at different levels of the system and the optimum levels of decision-making needed to serve the interests of learners. Learners may live in one area but choose to study in another, particularly if they wish to pursue a specialism. In defining their parameters, some local ecologies would correspond to the boundaries of LAs, while others might exist on either a larger or smaller scale, depending on their function. Examples can be found in all parts of post-14 education. For instance, adult and community education may be on a very local scale, near to or within particular communities and school/college consortia, while coming under the strategic oversight of LAs, often serve learners in only part of the local area. On the other hand, FE colleges and Learning Partnerships may operate on a sub-regional, regional or even national scale, as do some HE institutions.

Fostering collaboration and dealing with complexity, however, requires a strong and shared sense of purpose. The principle should be a commitment to raising the educational level of all, not just of a minority; and providers should be held jointly responsible for local levels of participation and achievement (Stanton and Fletcher 2006). Fulfilling such a commitment means collaboration between various providers, both large and small, support services, employers and community groups. Local ecologies thrive on collective agreement. This does not preclude responding to national targets or using markets, but the extent of the market could be decided collectively through, for example, the process of commissioning by LAs. Working by agreement can be a long and arduous process but the prizes are high levels of awareness and consensus about what and why decisions are being taken and a sense of commitment to bringing about sustainable change and future capacity building. There is, nevertheless, the question of leadership within local ecologies. There are roles for local and regional authorities to provide strategic planning; to arbitrate between the partners; to move decision-making forward; to commission provision by agreement; to work for local consistency and equity; and to provide accountability to democratically elected representatives at national, regional and local levels. Ecologies at whatever scale have to be entrusted with what Pratchett (2004) refers to as ‘freedom to’ bring about effective and equitable change and not just ‘freedom from’ central government.
MOVING FROM A SECTOR TO A SYSTEM

These proposals for a new system are not an unrealistic distant alternative. Some changes are already happening, particularly in response to criticisms of command and control. There is also a growing consensus, some would say almost a new orthodoxy, that more power should be devolved to the local level.

Shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown announced, in a publication called *The Governance of Britain*, ‘a new settlement’, which proposes to limit the powers of the executive, to make it more accountable, and to re-invigorate our democracy by, for example, placing ‘a duty on public bodies to involve local people in major decisions’ (Office of the Leader of the House of Commons 2007: 8). The Prime Minister also proposed a new concordat between local and central government and new committees to review the economies and public services of each region.

Another example of a culture change by the new administration is the reduction in the number of centrally determined targets. At their height in 1999 there were no less than 600 public sector agreements, which were reduced to 110 in 2004; the proposal now is to restrict them to only 30. Fewer targets, on their own, do not necessarily mean less command and control. However, the wider movement towards greater devolution of power has been gathering momentum for some time and suggests that they are part of a significant culture change. For example, arguments for a stronger role in the provision of public services were well made by the Lyons Review of local government, which accepted that, if real space is to be made available for local choices and priorities, then ‘variability between areas is not only inevitable, but also desirable if pressures are to be managed’ (2007: 8). Six months earlier, the White Paper on local government, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, had called for ‘a new settlement between central government, local government, and citizens (by reducing) the amount of top-down control from central government’ (DCLG 2006: 5-7). The White Paper also argued for Local Area Agreements with ‘a duty for local authorities and other local parties to work together to agree their priorities’ (ibid: 11). London’s regional Skills and Employment Board is yet another example of devolution in action, which may well be copied by other large city/regions.

These ideas resonate closely with proposals for devolved social partnership and collaborative local and regional ecologies. In other words, many of the features of our proposed system are coming into being or are already in place. However, these innovations mostly lie outside the LSS in the hinterland of local government, in other public services (e.g. health) and in debates about democracy and the public realm (Shah and Goss 2007). One of the aims of this paper is to link debates about learning, achievement and inclusion in the LSS to these wider democratic debates. Not only will this strengthen the movement for change but it will also link issues of learning and achievement to wider social, economic and political changes. It is only through such connections that a more effective and inclusive learning system will be able to emerge.
REFERENCES


ONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=311>


Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) Spending Review 2002, Chapter 4 Strong and secure communities (http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Spending_Review/spend_sr02/report/spend_sr02_repchap04.cfm) accessed 29 August 2007


Stoker, G. (2004), New Localism, Participation and Networked Community Governance, University of Manchester


This document was added to the Education-Line database on 17 November 2008