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Research Associate Report

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Lessons in partnership

What are leaders, teachers and students learning from collaborative approaches to personalisation?

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Contents

Introduction	3
Literature and research review	4
Context: early lessons in partnership	6
Background: The Department for Education and Skills' Innovation Unit Leading Edge Partnership Programme	8
Key questions	9
Methodology	10
Main findings	11
Conclusions: lessons being learned	19
Acknowledgements	20
References	21
Appendix 1: Partnership vision, objectives and outcomes	22
Appendix 2: Partnership learning programmes	23
Appendix 3: Partnership organisation	24
Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview questions for headteachers	25
Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview questions for teachers	26

Introduction

This paper chronicles a collaborative learning journey down a road towards what its readers will probably now recognise as 'personalisation' (DfES 2004). However, it is a journey that began without any clear signposts or obvious 'gateways' (Hargreaves, 2004a: 1). As such it is the story of how a group of four diverse schools and a Further Education (FE) college took practical steps to build partnerships beyond their individual classrooms in order to place learners from the same local area at the centre of a range of 'personalised' learning programmes. It considers the views of the leaders, teachers and students who have together experienced – and are still experiencing – that journey. They readily admit that they still have some way to travel but all agree that so far the journey has been more than worthwhile. This paper therefore offers qualitative reflections on the 'lessons in partnership' that they have learned en route.

Literature and research review

In addition to the specific research methods described in the methodology section, this paper also takes account of an evaluation of other research and writing on the theme of personalisation and capacity building potential through partnership-based working between schools. Despite the plethora of literature produced on the key features of the concept of personalised learning following a series of speeches between October 2003 and January 2004 by David Milliband, then Minister of State, the 'gateway' (Hargreaves 2004a: 1) relating to 'a network system' (Hargreaves 2004a: 33–5; Hargreaves 2004b) still remains relatively unexplored, whether this component is defined in terms of either 'creative approaches to school organisation' (NCSL 2005: 27) or 'strong partnerships beyond the classroom' (NCSL 2005: 27). Indeed, where issues of collaborative working have been explored, it has tended to be in the context of underperformance and federation (see, for example, Taylor and Ryan 2005: 212–20).

A much wider perspective has recently been offered by Michael Fullan, whose *Systems Thinkers in Action: Moving beyond the Standards Plateau* (2004) provides an eight-point framework for the establishment of sustainable and systemically significant learning networks. Perhaps most interestingly in relation to the focus of this research project is Fullan's identification of the 'moral purpose' (2004: 11) of a school's core activities and the importance of 'lateral capacity building through networks' (2004: 11) as being among the key strands of such a framework. He defines the former in terms of 'commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement' and 'engaging in the big picture of national policy and societal goals' (2004: 11). The latter is described as 'deliberate strategies where peers learn from each other' and which have a direct 'impact on changing the cultures of schools' (2004: 11).

Lateral learning, argues Fullan, flourishes in conditions which include 'a limited focus which can be pursued in depth in order to identify specific, high-yield best practices ... mechanisms for transferring and implementing best ideas ... motivation and ownership at the local level' (2004: 11), and where 'the focus of innovations must take into account or otherwise link to the LEA [local education authority] and national system of priorities' (2004: 12). Significantly, in the context of the focus for this research project (see the section on background), he identifies the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) Leading Edge Partnership Programme as reflecting this model, seeking to 'identify, extend and share innovation and excellence in ways that contribute to system-wide improvement' (2004: 12).

Indeed, this programme – from which the case study for this research project is drawn (see the section on background) – has itself been the focus of recent commentary. The DfES Innovation Unit has produced an evaluation of the impact of the Leading Edge Partnership Programme (DfES Innovation Unit 2004), which identifies both models for collaborative practice and practitioner perspectives on the process. It has also generated two 'Learning in Partnership' CD-ROMs, following national conferences in 2004 and 2005, which showcase practical examples of partnership-based working around a range of key themes (see the DfES' Innovation Unit website at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit). The 2005 version of the 'Learning in Partnership' CD-ROM includes presentations and video material relating to the Leading Edge Partnership Programme, which forms the basis of this research project. The work of Leading Edge Partnership Programme was also featured in a *Guardian* Education Supplement special edition in December 2004 (*The Guardian*, 2004).

Among the other research generated since early 2004, most commentaries acknowledge that the shaping of genuinely personalised learning programmes requires collaborative work between partner schools and institutions. For example, Charles Leadbeater argues in his overview of personalisation of provision across the public services (Leadbeater 2004), 'it is only possible to assemble solutions personalised to individual need if services work in partnership. An institution – for example a secondary school – should be a gateway to a range of learning offers provided not just by the school but by other local schools, companies, colleges and distance learning programmes' (2004: 14). The practical issues and dilemmas relating to collaborative approaches to the delivery of personalised learning in a still 'quasi-market' climate of educational provision are succinctly addressed by Martin Johnson in *Personalised Learning – An Emperor's Outfit?* (2004). Johnson points out that:

It might be argued that the policy of collaboration within diverse provision could lead to an economically efficient form of organization with a more personalised approach. Where a group of schools and colleges within a locality co-operate on a curriculum offer, a wider choice without diseconomy of scale could result... At the same time, the obstacles to these kinds of arrangements must be faced. There are costs involved in the transport of students between institutions, and staff time if supervision is required... At a deeper level, whereas many institutions are embracing the collaboration agenda, others are less enthusiastic. These are likely to be schools which have responded most enthusiastically to the autonomy granted to them over the last decade. Those which have been comfortable with concepts of the education market, and have been seeking market advantage against local 'rivals' will be less inclined to select reverse gear... The current pattern of levers and incentives on school activity does not favour collaboration. The league table culture, for example, may inhibit cross-institutional provision. Which school gets the league table credit for a pupil registered at one school who takes one subject at another?... If personalised learning is to be pursued partly by further encouragement towards institutional collaboration, ways of overcoming the counter-pressures of institutional autonomy and the quasi-market must be found. (Johnson 2004: 13–14)

By returning to the starting point of this brief journey through recent literature as it relates to this still somewhat hazily defined component of the personalisation process, we may find one approach to overcoming such cultural obstacles to collaboration in Fullan's aforementioned emphasis on the 'moral purpose' of schools' delivery of the curriculum – an approach, he argues, which must 'transcend the individual to become a quality of organizations and the system itself' (Fullan 2004: 11). He links this core purpose to a related 'commitment to changing context at all levels' (2004: 11), and offers the conclusion that 'systems thinkers in action basically say, if context is everything let's change it for the better' (2004: 11).

Two recent National College for School Leadership (NCSL) research projects shed particularly interesting light on the practicalities of such a process for school leaders and teachers, with James Turner's *Building Bridges: A Study of Independent–State School Partnerships* setting it in the context of the Independent/State School Partnerships (ISSP) scheme (Turner 2004), while Merrill Haeusler's *Pulling Together: Transforming Schools through a Collaborative Learning Network* considers collaboration in relation to the work of the South East England Virtual Education Action Zone (SEEVAZ) (Haeusler 2003).

Context: early lessons in partnership

This research represents the story of the first 18 months in the life of a three-year DfES Innovation Unit Leading Edge Partnership Programme, comprising a sports college, a performing arts college, a special school, a grammar school for the deaf and an FE college in Newbury, West Berkshire. It is the story of what, with the benefit of hindsight and subsequently intense debate, commentary and ministerial (and prime ministerial) announcements about the concept of 'personalisation', the partners at the time perhaps naively described as 'personalised learning programmes'.

The story starts in the autumn of 2003 when leaders from the sports college and the special school set out to 'work laterally' (Hargreaves 2004: 1), and further develop an existing sports college initiative designed to widen learning opportunities for students from both schools through Physical Education (PE) and Sport. This had at first been achieved through the integration of students with Mild Learning Disability (MLD) from the special school in mainstream PE and dance lessons at the sports college. Both schools recognised the two-way benefits of the initiative and, at the same time, a parallel initiative had been set up between the special school and a local performing arts college in other specialist curriculum areas. This had been equally well received. All of these schools also took advantage of the 'Increased Flexibility' Programme of vocational courses offered by the local FE college for their students in Key Stage 4.

With this background, the meetings which took place in the autumn term of 2003 began to explore how these separate, but related, examples of unilateral collaboration in a limited range of curriculum areas might be developed into more structured learning programmes, extending across both a broader range of subjects and wider family of local schools. In the course of these discussions, a shared vision for partnership-based provision began to emerge – a vision that was in turn to form the basis of a Leading Edge submission to the DfES Innovation Unit (see Appendix 1).

The key objective of the Leading Edge Partnership Programme was to raise the aspirations and standards of achievement of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) across the family of schools through new approaches to the mainstream delivery of personalised 14–19 learning programmes. In doing so, the programme set out to provide a new and innovative model of 'joined-up' and locally 'harmonised' specialist schooling. Such an approach would draw on and 'pool' the individual curriculum strengths of each partner school, thereby multiplying the range of courses and opportunities available to students. In addition to this core objective, the partnership also initially articulated a series of broader benefits that would emerge from curriculum-based collaboration – a 'partnership dividend'. This included:

- Promoting students' wider personal and social development, initially through the identified learning programmes but subsequently developing to include related extra-curricular activities that would be available to *all* students across the partnership.
- The provision of student leadership, peer mentoring and coaching opportunities.
- The development of teacher learning and knowledge about best practice in relation to inclusion through joint professional development opportunities and a structured programme of 'innovation exchange' across the partnership.
- Increasing levels of self-esteem among learners based on pre- and post-programme attitudinal questionnaires and online assessment tools.

From this starting point the partnership has developed a number of adapted, modular-style courses for students with a range of learning needs across the wider family of other special and specialist schools, with courses currently being offered in:

- PE
- Dance
- BTEC First Diploma in Sport
- Design Technology
- Drama
- Humanities
- The 'Leisure Industry' (an adapted Geography programme in Year 9)
- Leisure and Tourism

During the first year of implementation (September 2004–July 2005), these courses have been followed by students at the sports college, the performing arts college and the special school. The number and range of programmes is set to increase over the three years of the partnership in order to provide further progression routes, accommodate different learning needs and styles, including the gifted and talented, through out-of-hours enrichment courses (see Appendix 2). It is in this latter context that it is hoped that students from the grammar school for the deaf will also directly access the learning programmes. The FE college's role has been that of a provider of vocational programmes in Key Stage 4 through an enhanced Increased Flexibility Programme.

In practice, the partnership arrangements mean that teaching groups contain students from different schools and different year groups working together within and beyond the classroom in different locations. The programmes themselves have been personalised to provide greater individual advice and support by more closely matching provision to students' learning styles and preferences, the deployment of a wide range of teaching styles and the design of a 'bespoke' tracking programme which facilitates a process of assessment for learning. The use of the PASS (Pupil Attitudes to School and Self) attitudinal survey with students is also a distinctive feature of the work across the partnership.

The process of collaboration has impacted on several different levels within and across the partnership of schools, moving beyond issues of curriculum delivery and pathways to raise wider and deeper questions about school culture and organisation and the way in which networking capacity can generate creative methods of developing learning partnerships beyond the classroom as part of a partnership 'dividend'. Although the original destination of the journey has therefore not fundamentally changed, new opportunities and directions have opened up en route – an emergent example of the benefits of what has recently been described by Fullan as 'learning in context' (2004: 11) and 'systems thinking in action' (2004: 11).

As this research paper goes on to demonstrate, the school leaders and teachers feel that the first year of the collaborative programme has, in fact, exceeded their expectations in terms of its impact on student learning and development. However, at the same time, it is important to acknowledge that logistical obstacles, such as travel time between schools, act as a practical limitation on the number and range of courses that can be offered during the school day. This in turn poses wider questions about school organisation and curriculum delivery if the full benefits of such approaches to personalisation are to be felt.

Background: The Department for Education and Skills' Innovation Unit Leading Edge Partnership Programme

The DfES Innovation Unit launched the Leading Edge Partnership Programme in July 2003, with the aim of establishing and supporting school partnerships that adopted innovative approaches to learning challenges and developed and disseminated their successful practice to contribute to system-wide reform. A total of 103 partnerships involving over 700 schools were established in Cohort 1 from September 2003, with the addition of a further 102 partnerships involving over 400 schools in Cohort 2, which were launched in September 2004. The case study partnership was established in Cohort 2 of the programme. Each partnership is funded for a period of three years, with £60,000 per annum devolved to the partnership via the lead school.

Key questions

Using as a case study the Leading Edge Partnership Programme established across the four schools and FE college in West Berkshire, this paper explores the following key questions in relation to the development of partnership-based approaches to the delivery of personalised learning:

- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the leaders' leadership?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the teachers' teaching?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the students' learning?

Underpinning these questions is a series of sub-questions that relate to the 'cultural' impact of collaboration across the institutions. These include questions such as:

- How and to what extent was a common vision for personalised learning developed by leaders across the partnership?
- How and to what extent has the approach resulted in cultural and organisational change within and across the institutions?
- What, if any, have been the wider benefits of partnership-based approaches to personalisation in selected areas?

In exploring these questions, the paper will also indirectly consider how partnership-based approaches have impacted in each of the other four areas of personalisation which have now been identified:

- assessment for learning
- teaching and learning strategies
- curriculum entitlement and choice
- school organisation

The observations and commentary generated through this research process are qualitative in their nature. Quantitative output data on levels of student achievement will be available in the summer of 2006 when the first cohort of Leading Edge students complete their GCSE or equivalent studies. Data on changes relating to student attitudes and motivation are gathered on an ongoing basis through the use of the PASS survey.

Methodology

This paper draws on the direct experience and record of planning and delivering what is an ongoing and essentially 'organic' three-year partnership programme. It is also a programme that, as already described, has a context, history and organisational structure (see Appendix 3). This will also be explored in relation to the theme of partnership building capacity beyond the classroom. However, findings are based on the following research activities carried out specifically in relation to the research project:

- semi-structured individual interviews with the headteachers and senior leaders from the five institutions forming the partnership (Appendix 4)
- an analysis of the minutes of partnership planning and steering group meetings
- semi-structured individual interviews with teachers from three schools delivering the programmes across the partnership
- a focus group interview with teachers delivering the programmes (Appendix 5)
- lesson observations undertaken in the BTEC First in Sport, Leisure Industry and Vocation GCSE in Leisure and Tourism courses
- pre- and post-course attitudinal surveys of students following the personalised learning programmes using the PASS Programme initially developed by Sandwell and Dudley LEA
- focus group interviews with a cross-section of students from three of the partner schools
- a semi-structured interview with the learning support assistant from the special school supporting the personalised learning programmes across the partner schools

Interviews were transcribed and analysed in relation to comments made about the programme's impact on the focus areas of school culture and organisation and student learning. It should be noted that staff and students from my own school were interviewed and observed as part of the research process, but every effort was made to ensure the objectivity of the evidence gathered.

A senior teacher and personal tutor from the special school also contributed to the process. Two teachers who were unable to join the focus group interview responded to the questions in written format.

Main findings

The main findings of the research are summarised in the following three sections:

- *Lessons for leadership* – focusing on the views, perceptions and experiences of the school leaders and including an appraisal of the factors that have contributed to effective partnership working.
- *Lessons for teachers* – focusing on the views, perceptions and experiences of the classroom teachers and learning support assistant who have delivered the programmes in relation to both student learning and teacher knowledge and repertoire.
- *Lessons for students* – focusing on the views, perceptions and experiences of the students following these programmes.

Key points in relation to issues of leadership and school organisation and issues relating to student learning are summarised in the Conclusions.

Lessons for leadership

As already indicated above, the context to the establishment of the partnership meant that the school leaders and college principal had already met together on a number of occasions to formulate the Leading Edge submission to the DfES Innovation Unit. They also had experience of working together on a range of collaborative programmes involving one or more of the other Leading Edge partner institutions. Records of these meetings were used as part of the research process.

Three of the four secondary school headteachers and the FE college principal from the partnership family participated in the research. In a structured interview they were asked to respond to a series of questions which set out to elicit views on the impact of the collaboration on both *student learning* and *school leadership and organisation*. The full range of questions is shown in Appendix 4. The leaders were also given an opportunity to add further comments and observations. Their responses are analysed below in relation to the two primary areas of investigation – impact on student learning and impact on school leadership and organisation.

Impact on student learning

All the leaders felt that the programmes had been very effective in addressing individual student needs. These were wide-ranging, reflecting the breadth of the criteria used to initially identify the students for the programmes. The students were identified to take part in the programmes by staff within their 'home' school. The criteria for their selection varied from institution to institution, with a focus on the 'personalised' learning needs and profile of the individuals concerned. Within that context, the following groups of students could be identified:

- MLD students from the special school identified as having the potential to effectively access mainstream curriculum delivery in one or more specialist areas
- students already working in the mainstream setting assessed as being vulnerable and/or at risk of exclusion
- SEN students already working in the mainstream setting experiencing difficulties in accessing all curriculum areas
- mainstream students demonstrating specific preferences for learning programmes in sport and recreation/leisure

It was felt that the success of the programmes in meeting these learning needs was primarily based on their different focus and character. Previous approaches to

inclusion had been group-based. The personalised learning programmes were designed around individual student learning needs and preferences and certainly did not represent an 'experiment' in inclusion just for inclusion's sake. As the headteacher from the special school put it:

The difference about the Personalised Learning Programme is that rather than it just being, 'well, this group is going to be included', it's very much more a question of 'what's this young person need to get out of this course and what support do we need to give them to get it?'

Indeed, the closest and widest collaboration at the level of student integration had developed between the sports college and the special school – the original partners within the programme.

The headteacher of the special school noted particularly significant gains in the self-esteem and confidence of those students who were taking part in the Leading Edge Partnership Programmes – especially those on the BTEC First in Sport course offered in Key Stage 4. This observation was based on a combination of teacher knowledge of the individual students, work by an educational psychologist on self-esteem and the outcomes of the pre-and post-programme attitudinal surveys completed by the students.

The headteacher further commented that in terms of individual student gain, participation in the programme had surpassed expectations. Although there were very specific and notable course-based achievements – one student securing BTEC modular passes at distinction level, for example – she felt that a major, generic gain had been the students' ability to produce work which they were now proud to show other people. In many cases this involved the application of learning to other subject areas – particularly the use of ICT PowerPoint presentations.

The headteacher also noted that the MLD students were especially motivated by the practical application of their learning on the BTEC Sport programme, citing a badminton coaching video produced by one of the students which had subsequently been viewed and used by another member of her support staff who is himself a badminton coach.

Impact on school leadership and organisation

Although the initial partnership plan had been driven by the sports college as the lead school, it was felt that a shared vision had evolved through the first year of the partnership and that it was continuing to develop as the programme has matured, for example:

We are now thinking much more seriously about the localisation of meeting special learning needs.

I thought initially that it would only involve one or two students, but its really mushroomed and I've begun to see all sorts of opportunities for our students. It was then that I became determined that we were going to make it work.

They acknowledged that such 'pace setting' was necessary to initially kick-start the partnership and that, as such, it was not institutionally threatening. Indeed, the special school headteacher emphasised that this was a genuine partnership with a two-way link into both of the mainstream schools with which the school was working as part of the partnership. Mainstream students had visited and worked in the special school as part of the programme. The headteacher observed that this had been significant in breaking down a sense of isolation that had previously been experienced by special school students, and sometimes staff. In previous 'inclusion' projects they had 'gone out' to mainstream schools, but had never themselves 'hosted' other students. This gave them a sense of their own importance and identity.

Their leadership vision had broadened as a result of the initial experience of partnership and it had encouraged them to actively seek further means of building partnership capacity.

Experience of the programme had encouraged them to look at both inclusion and their curriculum offer in new ways:

Isolationist feeling has traditionally been built into the 'structure'. The real benefit of this programme is that it provides real opportunities at grassroots levels to break down the barriers which exist between the teaching of those children which are 'special' and those which are 'normal' or 'ordinary'. It's the grassroots stuff we really want to work at'.

The programme had resulted in significant organisational developments in relation to the tracking of student progress across institutions. A centralised student database had been established which was capable of tracking progress across the ability range of students identified for the personalised learning programmes. This needed to take account of a wide range of assessment criteria, including P-Levels, National Curriculum levels and GCSE grading. Comments in this area included:

We now have new ways of looking at value-added by partnership work across the institutions. This is itself an incentive for further collaboration.

This is an opportunity for a 'joined-up' assessment package for students.

The leaders had developed a better understanding of the use of learning support staff to support student progress and teacher effectiveness. Indeed, the headteachers of the sports college and the special school both felt that the learning support assistant from the special school who accompanied the MLD students had been crucial to the success of programme, providing a source of continuity and working very effectively with students from both institutions:

She carries ideas into the two schools.

The special school headteacher decided to restructure her leadership team on the basis of the partnership experience, modelling her team on the key stage responsibility posts her colleagues encountered when working with the mainstream schools and talking to the other headteachers.

There was a wider and deeper partnership 'dividend' that emerged from the original partnership and that was beginning to impact on the quality of teaching, learning and curriculum planning within individual institutions:

We hadn't thought about offering Leisure and Tourism here before. Now, having seen it in practice, we think 'actually that's really relevant – we'll introduce it here'.

Strategically, we are now looking at the curriculum in new ways.

The partnership has added additional value to the Increased Flexibility Programme.

The initial programme developed lateral capacity across the partnership and had the potential to act as a platform for further innovation within and across the individual schools. This was appreciated even where students from one school had not yet been directly involved in the programmes offered in year 1 of the partnership. For example, two 'spin-off projects' had developed between the sports college and the grammar school for the deaf – one involving a programme of professional development, the other a rapid improvement cycle initiative involving the development of mathematics software for students working below the average National Curriculum in Key Stage 3.

In all cases the leaders felt that participation in the partnership had cemented relationships and moved them into new dimensions. These included collaborative

approaches to professional development and, in one case, a common leadership development programme for both Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs). As a result, it was felt that this partnership momentum and dynamic would now continue to sustain collaborative work beyond the initial three-year funding phase of the Leading Edge Partnership Programme.

It was felt that there was still some 'unevenness' across the partnership, with different levels of access and student involvement depending on the individual circumstances of each partner school. This tended to be related to either the state of readiness of specific curriculum areas to offer appropriate learning programmes or, more generally, the basic logistics of timetabling common courses across up to four secondary schools. Leading Edge Partnership Programme funding was only confirmed in late June 2004, after the individual institutions had already set most of these timetables.

We are very keen to participate in the scheme at a larger level for pupils at all end of the ability spectrum but fear timetabling will make this nearly impossible, although the organisation of after school activities such as enrichment courses looks like a promising solution.

In this respect, the flexibility of the special school – setting their timetable after the sports college and performing arts college had established theirs – was acknowledged as a major factor contributing to the success of the programme in involving as many students as possible in year 1 of the programme.

It was felt that the practitioners' steering group, where teachers delivering the programme across the partnership of schools met to discuss curriculum delivery, offered an excellent organisational model for the wider dissemination of best practice in relation to teaching and learning. As such, this collaborative 'think-tank' or curriculum workshop was seen as representing a powerful vehicle for professional development across the partnership. Indeed, the headteacher of the special school emphasised that this group had provided significant feedback to the SLT at her school about both teacher knowledge and student learning. Two schools were now looking to develop this into more structured opportunities for teachers to work together to plan collaboratively. It was felt that not enough time had been scheduled for this process as part of the original partnership plan.

The bit that's missing is teacher time to work together.

Triggers for successful collaboration

In the commentaries provided by the school leaders, a number of common features were identified as contributing to the success of the programme. In particular:

- An existing context of collaboration between individual partners within the wider programme. Examples of this included prior cooperation on specific Specialist College Programmes, participation in the School Sports Coordinator Programme, discussion about the rationalisation of post-16 provision and the FE college-focused Increased Flexibility Programme. In this way, the development of the programme was viewed as a non-threatening, incremental process of change and progression. Collaboration was evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

We already had the benefit of informal contacts and working together within a local context.

- A management agreement (see Appendix 2) that articulated both a shared vision for the programme and an initial – but not overly constraining –

framework providing detail relating to the mechanics of programme delivery. Increasingly, this initial framework had become less significant as programme delivery developed a momentum of its own and the wider partnership 'dividend' emerged from the original focus of collaboration.

The development of understanding between mainstream and special schoolteachers is much more likely to break down barriers to learning than any regulation or 'legislation'.

- A sound and sensible balance between the need for an 'infrastructure' for collaboration – programme team meetings, delivery plans etc – and a commitment to ensure that the 'bureaucracy' of partnership did not delay or interfere with programme delivery for students. The leaders felt that complex organisational structures should not obscure the need to 'get on with it' and ensure that the widest possible range of programmes were in place for September 2004.
- An early recognition of the wider benefits that would accrue from collaboration on a specific project.

Lessons for teachers

The following courses are offered through the Leading Edge Partnership Programme:

In Key Stage 3

- Dance and PE (based at the sports college)
- Design Technology (based at the sports college)
- Drama (based at the performing arts college)
- Geography – 'The Travel Industry', with OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA) National Skills Profile Leisure and Tourism modules (based at the sports college)
- Humanities (based at the performing arts college)

In Key Stage 4

- A BTEC First Diploma in Sport (at the sports college)
- A vocational GCSE in Leisure and Tourism, supplemented by relevant units from the OCR Skills Profile (at the sports college)
- National Vocational Qualification Level 1 courses in Beauty, Catering and Construction offered as part of the 'Increased Flexibility' Programme (at the FE college)
- Units from the OCR National Skills Profile – Leisure and Tourism, Performing Arts, ICT (across all of the institutions)

Six teachers involved in the delivery of these programmes took part in a focus group interview structured around a set of initial stimulus questions. These are summarised in Appendix 5.

The teachers' experience of the impact of the programme on both their teaching and the learning of students was very positive.

Student learning

In terms of student impact, they commented that there had been significant learning gains for all the students that went beyond the course-specific elements of the programme. These included greater confidence in their own abilities and more independence. As one of the sports college teachers put it:

Special school pupils joining the lesson has worked well in terms of confidence and participation in activities.

The special schoolteachers noted a particularly wide range of benefits for the MLD students on the programme:

The programme has actually exceeded expectations.

In particular, they identified:

- improvements in behaviour
- improvements in levels of attendance
- improvements in reading age which were greater than expected
- greater self-esteem
- related skill gains, resulting in approved attainment in other current areas, and in particular, the application of ICT and literacy
- the development of leadership skills which were being applied and having a direct impact on younger students at the special school. For example, one of the Year 11 students following the BTEC First in Sport programme was now voluntarily running a lunchtime basketball club for students at the school

The relevance of the programmes to the identified students, as opposed to size of learning group, was regarded as the key factor in securing these gains.

They're engaged in learning in something that they really enjoy doing. It has raised everything else because they can see success.

The specific courses had met their individual learning needs and provided the curriculum-based stretch and challenge for selected special school students beyond the resources that would otherwise have been available.

Engagement in learning that they really enjoyed was having a 'locomotive effect' in other areas, with students experiencing success and building on it. It was also noted that the special school students now see that they are capable of achieving as much as mainstream students and their confidence has grown significantly as a result of the integrated learning context. The teachers only identified one area where they felt that the pace of learning had been too slow for an individual student.

'Teacher learning'

In terms of the exchange, development and deepening of teacher knowledge, differing gains for staff from both the special and mainstream schools were identified.

The special schoolteachers and learning support assistant noted gains in specialist subject-based knowledge that they were carrying back into the classroom. As a result of her experience of the programme, the special school learning support assistant had now decided to train to become a teacher.

Mainstream teachers noted gains in terms of:

- Their use and deployment of learning support assistants.
- Their teaching repertoire, particularly in relation to differentiation and communication of learning objectives. This was despite the initial apprehension of one less experienced mainstream teacher from the sports college, who noted pre-programme concerns about the levels of ability and demands of the special school students joining the teaching group

At first I felt apprehensive. I've never done anything like this before. I was unsure of the level of ability I would be teaching.

- Their awareness of students' preferred learning styles as part of the lesson planning and review process

All teachers recognised the significance of the use of the PASS attitudinal survey to inform their planning and classroom practice. This had resulted in their enhanced knowledge of the students' individual learning profiles and needs:

We can now tailor-make a programme of study so that each child is successful.

They also noted the value of the practitioners' group as a vehicle for professional development and as a means of sharing best practice across institutions.

Lessons for students

At present, 43 students in Years 9, 10 and 11 are directly involved in the Leading Edge Partnership Programmes on offer across the partnership. The 'personalised' nature of the programmes means that they may be taught outside of their year group for particular courses. For example, the BTEC First in Sport group contains:

- Three Year 10 students from the sports college who opted for the course as a 'normal' part of their Key Stage 4 options choice process
- One Year 10 student from the sports college identified for the programme on the basis of curriculum interests and learning styles
- One Year 9 student from the sports college accelerated onto the programme because of curriculum interests and learning styles, but experiencing difficulties in accessing other curriculum areas
- Two Year 11 MLD students from the special school identified for the programme because of their vocational interests and very successful involvement in the earlier pilot sports college integration programme

All students involved in the Personalised Learning Programme already complete the PASS online self-assessment Programme in order to develop understanding of their learning needs and profile. This is completed before during and after the programme in order to track changes in areas such as:

- feelings about school
- perceived learning capacity
- self-regard
- preparedness for learning
- attitude to teachers
- general work ethic
- learner confidence
- attitude to attendance
- response to the curriculum

All students involved in the programmes also took part in a motivational seminar and team-building activity designed to break down attitudinal barriers to learning and achievement and raise expectations and self-esteem. Two celebrity sports mentors contributed to these events – a former Olympic silver medallist over 400m and a current Paralympic 800m gold medallist. As a world-leading disabled athlete, the latter had a particularly powerful impact given the characteristics of the cohort of students.

A cross-section of these students took part in a focus group interview based on the following questions:

- What do you most enjoy about your Leading Edge course(s)?
- What are the main differences between your Leading Edge course(s) and other subjects?

- Do you feel that you learn better on your Leading Edge courses than in other subjects? If so, what are the main reasons for this?
- Is there anything you would like to change or improve about the Leading Edge courses?

The students felt that:

- The courses offered through the Personalised Learning Programme were more motivational than their other options choices, largely because of the variety of learning styles employed by teachers.
- Participation on the programme, and particularly the BTEC First in Sport course, had increased their all-round confidence as learners. They stressed the importance of making presentations in this context and felt that they were able to apply skills developed on the programme to other curriculum areas. English was emphasised as a key area in this respect.

We do lots of presentations and this links in with subjects like English. We also do things like evaluating and analysing texts.

- Relationships with both their teachers and peers were better on these programmes than in other curriculum areas.

The group is great. Relationships within the group are excellent. We all get on very well.

- Increased confidence meant that they were now much more prepared to ask questions to clarify understanding in other curriculum areas.
- It was interesting and enjoyable to work with students from other schools on a regular basis and there hadn't been any sense of tension or resentment as a result of being joined by these students.
- Working outside their chronological age group was challenging and exciting.
- The work of the learning support assistant from the special school across the whole group was recognised and greatly appreciated.

She helps everyone in the group – not just the special school students.

- The support of adult mentors from outside of each of the individual schools had been particularly exciting and beneficial – particularly in view of the sports 'celebrity' status of a number of the mentors that the partnership was able to attract to the programme.
- The special school students felt that working in the mainstream school had increased their confidence and encouraged them to follow their studies further than they otherwise would have thought possible.

I come here and I mix with the sports college students and that's good fun – and making new friends. I used to be quite shy, nervous of meeting new people and nervous of them and their opinions. And now my confidence has gone up and now I want to go on to college, once I've finished my BTEC, and do carpentry.

- All the students were proud to be part of the programme.
- They commented that they had made new friends that contributed to a happy and supportive learning environment.
- Students from the mainstream schools commented that their perception of what students from a special school could achieve had been changed.

Their improvement is excellent. I mean they're working at the same level as us. They get most of their projects done quicker than us! It's really interesting and good for us as well, I think.

Conclusions: lessons being learned

In considering the wider 'lessons' of partnership, research findings offer a number of key messages in relation to the principle focus areas of school organisation and student learning.

Leadership and school organisation

- Collaborative approaches in initially limited curriculum areas rapidly generate momentum for wider partnership building.
- The initial collaboration in the focus areas provides a longer-term partnership dividend with both anticipated and unanticipated spin-offs into other areas of organisation and learning.
- Practical obstacles such as the difficulties in establishing common timetabling arrangements have not significantly impaired the collaborative vision and extent of programme development between partners. However, multi-layered collaboration on courses involving more than two schools simultaneously remains more problematic and is currently best secured through out-of-hours provision.

Student learning

The Partnership Programme has resulted in:

- specific gains in individual student knowledge and progress
- major benefits beyond initial purpose and curriculum focus areas of collaboration relating to student attainment, confidence and motivation
- major gains in relation to students' ability to apply their learning in new contexts

In establishing the components of the over-arching vision for the programme, the partnership might be seen to provide practical lessons in engaging in aspects of what Fullan describes as *Systems Thinkers in Action* (see the section on the literature and research review). The 'moral purpose' (Fullan 2004: 11) of such collaboration, most notably a commitment to closing the achievement gap between students, challenging low expectations and engaging in wider national policy and societal goals relating to inclusion, has generated much learning about the nature of partnership building. They have been valuable lessons – *lessons in partnership* – which will now continue to shape the learning journeys being followed both within and across the schools involved.

Recommendations for other school leaders

For other school leaders about to embark on such a journey, the three key learning outcomes from the partnership would therefore seem to be:

- Start with a clear focus or theme to the collaborative project, but set it within the context of a shared vision for longer-term growth.
- Allow collaboration to grow organically and move in new directions – the indirect gains of the process may be as, if not more, significant than the original focus of the partnership.
- Develop opportunities and structures for practitioner-based dialogue and 'innovation exchange': this is the real dividend of partnership approaches to the delivery of personalised learning.

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Appendix 1: Partnership vision, objectives and outcomes

The following vision statement, objectives and expected outcomes were identified in the partnership's submission to the DfES Innovation Unit in January 2004.

Agreed vision

The Leading Edge Partnership Programme will raise standards of achievement, widen opportunities and increase the life chances of SEN students across the family of schools through the integrated mainstream delivery of personalised 14–19 learning programmes. In doing so, it will provide a ground-breaking model of coherent vision in relation to the creative and 'joined-up' delivery of locally harmonised specialist schooling, multiplying structured and informal approaches to the exchange of innovative practice and acting as a platform for the longer-term development of extended and inclusive provision both across and beyond the partnership. It will therefore change traditional structures and thinking to provide genuinely personalised learning and raise the attainment and aspirations of students.

Objectives and outcomes

- Increased standards of achievement for students currently educated in the separate mainstream specialist and special schools.
- The phased provision of fully inclusive learning, with opportunities for both educational and social integration of students across the transitional partnership, and ultimately within a single learning community.
- An increased number of students currently educated in the separate special school gaining Levels 1–3 in selected subjects at the end of Key Stage 3.
- An increased number of students currently educated in the separate special school entered for and achieving one or more A*–G GCSEs.
- The increased retention of MLD students currently educated in the separate special school in post-compulsory study at Newbury College.
- The increased participation of students currently educated in the Castle School in selected programmes provided through the Increased Flexibility Programme offered in conjunction with Newbury College at Key Stage 4.
- Phased increase in the integration of SEN students into an increasingly wide range of mainstream classes and extra-curricular activities across the partnership, initially focusing on Art, Drama and Music in 2003–04 and rolling out further in subsequent years.
- The partnership provides educational, recreational and social opportunities that prepare students for active participation as adults within diverse communities.
- The development of cross-phase and inter-institutional peer mentoring programmes.
- The collaboration between different specialist schools, facilitating an exchange of 'expert' staff between institutions and supporting the phased integration of SEN students into mainstream classes and activities as above.
- An increased number of collaborative professional development sessions led by staff from all partner schools.
- The establishment of a two-way professional development – the special school to provide training for the sports college and performing arts college in relation to SEN best practice, the mainstream specialist schools to provide subject-based training for the special school staff.

Appendix 2: Partnership learning programmes

In September 2005, personalised provision was widened from this essentially 'foundation' level focus to include an extension and enrichment programme for the gifted and talented. A series of intensive 'twilight'/Period 6 GCSE courses are offered at the sports college to students across the partnership in Key Stage 4, also allowing the option of students from Key Stage 3 to join individual programmes. The following subject areas are offered as part of the personalised learning programme:

- Economics
- Geology
- Media Studies
- Performing Arts
- Psychology
- Statistics
- French, German or Spanish
- An accelerated one-year History course.

Appendix 3: Partnership organisation

The following elements of partnership organisation were detailed in the submission to the DfES Innovation Unit in January 2004:

- A Leading Edge Partnership Programme steering group with teacher and governor representatives from all partners, the LEA and a special schools consultant to manage, monitor and review the strategies, funding and accountabilities in relation to the partnership. The steering group meets on a termly basis.
- A termly personalised learning delivery team meeting attended by the practitioners involved in teaching the identified courses within the Personalised Learning Programme and chaired by the partnership development manager.
- An annual partnership Development Plan and three-year Strategic Plan with clearly defined actions and targets in relation to key areas of collaboration across the partnership. These were identified as:
 - levels of student integration and progress as measured through agreed performance data;
 - curriculum development and innovation, including targets for the delivery and phased roll-out of further differentiated and personalised learning programmes across Key Stages 3–5;
 - the professional development of staff.
- The appointment of a Leading Edge Partnership Programme development manager to lead and coordinate the implementation of the Partnership Programme and chair the steering group. This is the deputy headteacher of the sports college.

Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview questions for headteachers

Focus: views of school leaders on the development of personalised learning programmes

Background information

Could you confirm the number of students on roll, their age range and the nature of their special educational needs?

Student programmes

- What was the basis on which students were identified for the personalised learning programmes?
- Who was involved in the identification of students?
- What were the principal learning needs of the students identified?
- How and to what extent have the personalised learning programmes addressed these needs?
- What have been the major learning gains for the students identified?
- To what extent do you feel that the personalised learning programmes have enhanced student learning beyond what might have been possible within your own school?
- In what areas have the programmes been less effective?

Leadership and school organisation

- What were your initial feelings about the establishment of the Personalised Learning Programme?
- How/have these subsequently changed/developed as the programme has been implemented?
- In what ways do you feel that teacher knowledge and expertise has been enhanced through the programme?
- What, if any, do you feel to have been the wider benefits of collaboration in this area?
- To what extent has the programme affected/changed your approach to school leadership and views on school organisation?

Are there any further comments/points you would wish to make?

Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview questions for teachers

Focus: views of practitioners on the development of personalised learning programmes

Background

Which schools/learning programmes are represented?

Student programmes

- What was the basis on which students were identified for the personalised learning programmes?
- Who was involved in the identification of students?
- What were the principal learning needs of the students identified?
- How and to what extent have the personalised learning programmes addressed these needs?
- What have been the major learning gains for the students identified?
- To what extent do you feel that the personalised learning programmes have enhanced student learning beyond what might have been possible within your own school?
- In what areas have the programmes been less effective?

Teaching and learning

- What were your initial feelings about the establishment of the Personalised Learning Programme?
- How/have these subsequently changed/developed as the programme has been implemented?
- In what ways do you feel that teacher knowledge and expertise has been enhanced through the programme?
- What, if any, do you feel to have been the wider benefits of collaboration in this area?
- To what extent has the programme affected/changed your approach to teaching and learning?

Are there any further comments/points you would wish to make?