The WEST Partnership: Back to the Future?

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1. Introduction and context

The Scottish educational system is at a crossroads. The severe and wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic are becoming clearer, and the system has been through a series of reviews, with announcements of impending reforms in a climate of a cost-of-living crisis and financial austerity. 'Reimagining' education systems in pursuit of educational equity and excellence requires an learner focused, evidence-informed approach to improvement which underpinned by collaborative research/working, leadership for change and networked learning to develop creative and innovative ways to respond to uncertain times.

Our analysis suggests that WEST adds value to the work of local authorities whilst also supporting cultural change and a shift towards a more networked, decentralised set of arrangements. Furthermore, the WEST partnership provides a context and mechanism for cultural change that promotes subsidiarity and places decision-making and support for improvement closer to the learning level, a call made by many including the review undertaken by the OECD in 2015. This said, promoting cultural change is a complex and challenging task which is often compounded by structural challenges that can undermine efforts and hinder progress and there is much work still to be done.

This paper draws out some of the key messages from the second external evaluation report[1] of the West Partnership (WEST) Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) undertaken by the University of Glasgow's Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change. The paper is organised in two sections. At the end of this section we move on to reflect on some of the facilitators and inhibitors associated with the development of the WEST and the implications for the Partnership and more widely for Scottish education.

The WEST approach

The WEST 'Learning system' is developed around a set of principles, structures and processes found in the literature on effective networks. Much of the approach and underpinning theory lends itself to the concept of the Networked Learning System[2], which is particularly evident in the WEST networks, including West OS. This approach serves to draw resources together and move knowledge, expertise, and instructive practice across school and local authority boundaries so that the impact of efforts is greater than the sum of the parts.

[1] Bell, I., Hall, S. and Lowden, K (2022) *Reflections on the WEST Partnership Recovery to Renewal: Reimagining the Future.* Unpublished report by the University of Glasgow

[2] ICEA (2020) International Council of Education Advisors Report 2018-2020 Second Report to Scottish Government 17th December 2020, pdf last accessed: 1st February 2021

Put simply, WEST serves to develop a smarter system that can move the very best features of Scottish education around the country and impact more consistently on outcomes for all learners irrespective of who they are or where they come from. We now move on to unpack some of the key facilitators and inhibitors associated with the approach that WEST adopted over the past year.

2. Key Facilitators and Inhibitors

The evaluation highlighted several facilitators that tended to accelerate development and some inhibitors which tended to suppress developments. The facilitators included:

- **Networked Learning** – This teacher-led response to the challenges of the pandemic is one of the major achievements of WEST. There have been positive impacts upon staff and learners. Staff have been 'upskilled' in digital pedagogy and practices and learners have been able to access learning out of school at a time which suits them. This achievement was enabled by teacher responsiveness and commitment, individuals driving the development forward, strategic direction and support and good external partner relationships. The WP core team was crucial to the successful implementation and roll-out of this initiative across Scotland.

- **Developing Agency and Collective Capacity** – The increased confidence and sense of agency enhanced creativity and openness to adopting new approaches through WEST activity (e.g. in promoting health and wellbeing, Improving our Classrooms). For senior school leaders, involvement in WEST networks added value to the work of their LAs and impacted on their own school improvement planning. Those involved in WEST experienced increased autonomy and felt empowered to make decisions. This contributed to building agency to drive improvement with other schools within and beyond their LA. Bespoke professional leaning and discussion sessions within collaborative learning networks (e.g. in the Learner Wellbeing Network) has built

- **The Virtual Leadership Networks (VLN)** were perceived as crucial in providing a supportive and safe environment to meet the needs of leaders (HTs/DHTs) to address the challenges of the pandemic. This peer collaboration also allowed for space to reflect upon those challenges and to inform strategic and operational improvements for both staff and students in their schools. VLNs were designed to offer integral support to the system. Almost 500 HTs and DHTs took part, which represented a significant proportion of school senior leaders, from all the WP LAs at the time. Without the infrastructure of the WEST it is unlikely that this collaborative approach would have emerged.

- **A `Safe Space`** - The WEST provided a safe space for open dialogue and support For example, the WP provided a series of professional learning sessions co-delivered with ES and RIC colleagues for home link workers or their equivalents. WEST has also bought senior leaders within the LAs much closer together. This increased sense of collective agency which has been a very positive feature of the evolution of the partnership, benefiting both individual LAs and the partnership as a whole. The *Virtual Leadership Networks* (VLN) provided a supportive and safe environment to meet the needs of leaders (HTs/DHTs) to address the challenges of the pandemic. Almost 500 HTs and DHTs took part, which represented a significant proportion of school senior

leaders, from all the WP LAs at the time. Without the infrastructure of the WEST it is unlikely that this collaborative approach would have emerged.

- **Adding Value to the Local Authorities –** As has been noted previously, WEST has added value to the work of LAs in a variety of ways. However, WEST has also provided a platform for LA officers to plan strategically to avoid duplication of activity or provision. There is a growing recognition that LAs can access professional learning or programmes delivered by the WP and concentrate resources and reduce workloads, by focussing on priority or complementary activity. We previously identified collaborative and networked learning and sharing (on a systems scale) as key enablers in building agency and collective capacity during the pandemic. WEST added value through a diverse professional learning offer often in partnership with Education Scotland (ES), Robert Owen Centre (ROC) and others. These were opportunities for professional learning and development, which otherwise may not have existed, or due to budget constraints could not be funded by individual LAs. Furthermore, rather than relying solely on 'in house' efforts or on one provider this mixed economy enhances quality and consistency of provision.

- **Partnership with Education Scotland –** this collaboration had a positive impact on network development and progress, with network members appreciative of the specialist knowledge and expertise offered to the groups and the named contact support for activity in schools and local authorities. They felt they also benefited from national up to date knowledge. The Spring Webinar Series was highlighted as important, being co-delivered with WEST and developed as a response to ES`s response to WEST network `need'. Pre-existing relationships were seen to be of value in the pandemic as practitioners and LA staff reached out through their professional networks for support and guidance.

Overall, the picture is very positive. WEST has worked hard to build a collaborative culture and much progress has been made since the inception of the RIC. WEST has moved from a position where the preservation and acquisition of resources and power dominated the agenda towards a position where leaders across the RIC now understand the benefits of collaboration across the LAs. Leaders are increasingly recognising that what is in WEST's interests is also in the LA's interest. Working across WEST can build individual LA capacity so that the totality becomes greater than the sum of the parts. All of this said, senior leaders are also learning that there are some activities that are better taken at the local LA level. This improves efficiency of the RIC and enhances both LA and WEST effectiveness.

The development of WEST has required significant shifts in leaders thinking and behaviours. This cultural change is not easy and requires the consideration of four 'Ts'. First, cultural change takes *time,* second, cultural change requires a climate of *transparency*, third, cultural change requires high levels of *trust* and finally, fourth, cultural change demands *tenacity*. However, despite significant progress in the most challenging times there remains much work to be done in propelling the Partnership to the next level of performance. In doing so the following inhibitors will require careful consideration and thoughtful navigation:

- **Sustaining the eco-system** remains a legacy issue from our previous report. WEST has managed to recruit a range of talented staff on secondment. However, the enforced return of these 'reticulists' to their substantive roles after 23 months has a

potential negative impact upon WEST development and sustainability. This is a challenge for all RICs of course. This was also applicable to changes in ES staff at the same time; whilst there can be both advantages and disadvantages to this model, it did seem that a great deal of `institutional knowledge` from all the key stakeholders was lost at this time and it would seem sensible to find a solution to retaining staff for longer than 23 months should this be appropriate.

- **Reaching teachers** – WEST is making is making many more inroads into classrooms, reaching more teachers, and having more impact on practice. There is an increasing number of examples of professional learning opportunities which focus on the learning and teaching and supporting the learner experience. However, there remain many teachers across WEST that have yet to engage in WEST activity. There is of course, an issue of WEST's own capacity of moving to scale with relatively limited resources. However, for the next phase of development WEST should focus on achieving both 'depth' and 'spread' across the partnership and consider moving beyond current modes of communication to achieve this, see below.

- **Communications** – The current modus operandi of external communications may not be having the traction that is anticipated. Social media, newsletters and highlight reports all serve important purposes but may be an explanation for lack of engagement in some quarters. Internally, the connectedness between networks could be further enhanced to build greater capacity and ensure synergy across workstreams so that activities and areas of work are mutually reinforcing to promote collective impact across WEST. Messaging is also important particularly in terms of moving to scale and achieving spread. If teachers are to invest their valuable time and energy in WEST activity the need to be clear about the nature of the opportunities, how to access them and the gains, both individually and collectively.

- **Follow-through: Capturing learning and impact in the classroom** – Internal evaluation of WEST professional learning opportunities and programmes is a strength of WEST's development as a Networked Learning System. However, further emphasis could be placed on tracing the impact of the programmes on classroom practice and impact on learner outcomes. Therefore, a stronger focus on capturing if and/or how practitioners have used their learning in the classroom and the impact on experiences and outcomes of learners would add further insight and weight to these evaluations. There was some uncertainty regarding systematic approaches to capturing learning within the networks although additional value was recognised through engaging with external expertise and professional knowledge. ES partners were valued for their specialist expertise and knowledge of current national policy. University partners were seen to bring key research capacities and systems knowledge to the networks.

- **Local Authority context –** As noted previously, this work takes *time* and requires a climate of *transparency*, *trust* and *tenacity*. It is a complex and often fraught with challenge. These challenges are compounded by the nuance of each LAs context, in terms of LA size, priorities, resources, performance, phase of development etc. dictates individual LA capacity for engagement, and as noted previously, as WEST has developed there has been learning about what is best achieved at LA level and what is best undertaken through the RIC. This all requires the development of a

shared understanding and shared expectation about who has the capacity and capability to contribute to WEST activity at any given time about any given agenda.

- **Clarity of roles and responsibilities** – Working across multiple boundaries- geographical, political, professional institutional, naturally creates ambiguities which can inhibit developing a shared understanding about the nature of the task in hand. This can be mitigated by ensuring there is clarity about roles responsibilities. It is important that all stakeholders have a shared understanding about the roles and responsibilities of all involved. This requires constant reinforcement as the partnership evolves and experiences churn in staffing. Furthermore, to ensure commitment to developing the work all must be clear about network aims, goals were and the composition of the group. If the aims, goals lacked clarity or individuals could not see benefits to collaboration, then commitment is likely to be lower.

Put simply, the inhibitors and the associated challenges that they present should be no surprise to us. However, they do present significant issues, especially in the current climate when resources are scarce and the future, in terms of the arrangements of the Scottish education system and the wider social and economic climates are uncertain. WEST is well placed and has made significant progress in very challenging times. However, confidence and strength of leadership will be required If WEST is to tackle the challenges outlined above successfully.

Closing remarks

The WEST partnership has made much progress since its initiation and the work of the partnership continues to expand and penetrate deeper into classrooms. However, there remains much work to be done to embed and sustain WEST activity so that it adds value to the work going on in *all classrooms* across the partnership. With continued resourcing at current levels, it would seem that the WEST has a role to play in the further development of the Scottish education system.

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