

SEC – Consultant of the Month – September 2007 – Judy (Judith) Larsen.

For Australian Judy Larsen, education is quite simply in the blood. “My grandmother was a school principal in the days when that was not something that women did. My father and identical twin sister have also been principals. In fact my sister has spent time working for a number of LEAs in the UK and is both a great colleague and my confidante. So you could say there’s a long family tradition of education.”

It is a tradition that Judy herself has certainly built upon. She has extensive experience of teaching, at primary, secondary and university levels. The highlights of her teaching career include a three-year period as the foundation principal of a new and innovative secondary school in Western Australia.

Judy came to the UK 11 years ago with her husband and two children after winning a prestigious Commonwealth Relations Trust scholarship to undertake PhD studies into *Change and Innovation in Secondary Schools* at the Institute of Education. She has since built a successful career here as an education consultant.

“I have worked across a broad range of projects and although I’m based in London, I work all over the UK, including Northern Ireland. I do a lot of policy research for the Department [*for Children, Schools and Families*], mostly on improvement, with a particular focus on behaviour. I also work extensively for PricewaterhouseCoopers and have just signed a contract with the NCSL.

“Much of the research that I do involves working with young people and getting their views, across both the primary and secondary sectors. The big driver for me is contact with schools and with children – I really like that immediate contact.”

She applauds some of the changes currently taking place in UK education, particularly the “amazing new resources going into schools”. Judy also welcomes the “long overdue” move away from an overly prescriptive curriculum with its inherent dangers of “age, stage, cage”. “There is a recognition that shoehorning children into a lot of pretty formulaic curricula is simply not going to meet the diversity of needs that exists. The focus now on literacy and learning is such an important ingredient.” However, she cautions that there is much work still to be done here. “Having taught Year 1 myself, for example, I think the increased emphasis on personalisation is actually very challenging from a practical point of view. We need to ask ‘what does that actually mean?’ and ‘how will it translate into pedagogy and curriculum?’”

Judy is excited by the opportunities that membership of the SEC can provide, but has some words of advice for her colleagues too. “Education consultancy can be quite a solitary occupation, so one of the benefits of being part of a professional group is to learn from other people and explore opportunities for collaboration and for professional development. There is a tremendous range of work available, but there are also a huge number of consultants working with schools and in some schools there is even a little bit of over-supply, so I think the real skill for consultants is the ability to connect to the experience of people within schools so that the help they provide is meaningful. Having worked as a principal and in senior LEA positions, I learned to be a little suspicious about consultants: you have to be very clear about your role and about how sensitive and important that role is.”

“I have had an amazingly varied career to date and I certainly haven’t followed a typical career trajectory. I think that has given me a tremendous opportunity to see education from a number of different perspectives and I hope that will prove useful in my work as part of the SEC committee,” Judy concludes.