

## **From the Chair...The SEC and the Future**

*The launch of our new website and the appointment of a General Secretary mark the beginning of a new phase in the development of the Society of Education Consultants. SEC Chair **Nick Zienau** looks at where the society has come from and where we are going.*

In 1990, when the Society of Education Consultants was started, educational consultancy was just beginning to emerge as a viable career in the UK. I remember my boss the Chief Inspector of the ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) saying to me: "You will never make a living as a freelance in the field," when I told him what I planned to do - and that was only in 1989.

Since then, the profession of education consultancy has grown by leaps and bounds as education in this country has become decentralised (and, in 1990, ILEA became one of the first 'casualties' of this process). Schools and colleges were increasingly given control of their own budgets, which meant they had the money to pay for consultancy. The other side of the coin was that jobs-for-life ceased to be so much of a feature of the education world, which resulted in growing numbers of people moving out of schools and LEAs and into education consultancy as a career move.

From the very beginning, the SEC proved to be a valuable source of support for our members. Benefiting from the help and reassurance the society offered them in such a new profession, some of the early members of the society went on to build consultancies which are now some of the largest firms in the country.

Through the intervening period, the SEC has continued to function pretty well. We have always offered new consultants invaluable opportunities to network and learn from the experiences of others. Wanting to work to professional standards, we know members value the reassurance given to clients by our code of conduct. And we have found members also appreciate the very tangible benefits we offer, such as an excellent scheme of professional indemnity insurance.

Yet it is also true that as a society, we have not grown as rapidly as the expanding free market in education advice would suggest we might. Our membership has remained fairly stable at between 100 and 150 members, while the profession has grown tremendously. Everything we hear from those who know the Society suggests to us that we are an attractive well-priced proposition to anyone in the field who wishes to join a society of fellow professionals. Our intention is now, for the first time, to put considerable energy and effort into attracting a larger proportion of the profession to join us. Moving forward and expanding in an active way will, I believe, be beneficial for consultants and for our clients.

The web is now allowing us to do things that were never possible before. Our new website already enables small specialised consultants and consultancies to reach out easily into the education world and make their presence known, communicating as much information as they want to clients across the country and the globe. The SEC

exists to support independent consultants to publicise their expertise, experience and news online to anyone with access to the web. Our belief is that it is healthy for clients and for consultants to have alternative ways of getting and making contracts than going through the big consultancies.

On the demand side, the website enables us to get work opportunities immediately to our members without any trouble. Millions of pounds-worth of work are already offered online each year by email and we are seeking to actively encourage clients and consultancies to use this service.

For the future, I believe one of the big opportunities for the society is to give advice to those interested in joining our profession. For example, many headteachers taking early retirement do not want their career to end, but equally they do not want to link up with a big consultancy firm. We can show them that they don't have to. In that sense we can liberalise the market.

The appointment of our first paid General Secretary is also important because it gives the SEC the resources to market itself, to improve its communications, particularly through the website, and to maintain high administrative standards as the society starts to grow.

As a society, we have much to be proud of: we are independent, professional and also well connected. We were there right at the beginning, so we have experience and expertise and experience not just of education but also of how the consulting industry works. The challenge now is to get that message across to a wider audience, both of potential members and of clients.