

Adult learning, policy and accreditation

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Impact of Policy on Learning and Skills Project (2004-7)

- Analysis of over 300 policy documents
- 131 interviews with policy actors at European, national, regional and local levels
- 24 learning sites in London and NE
 - 8 ACL, 8 FE, 8 WBL
 - 349 learners and 210 interviews with tutors, managers and ULRs



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Impact of Policy on Learning and Skills Project (2004-7)

- Directors
 - Professor Frank Coffield (IoE London)
 - Dr Ian Finlay (University of Strathclyde)
 - Professor Ann Hodgson (IoE London)
 - Professor Ken Spours (IoE London)
- Research Officers
 - Sheila Edward (University of Edinburgh)
 - Richard Steer (Norwich City College)

Government initiatives for adults

- Three major initiatives during the Project
 - Skills for Life
 - Employer Training Pilots (now Train to Gain)
 - Trade Union Learning Fund with Union Learning Representatives
- All focused on adults gaining qualifications and entering into or progressing within the workplace as a result



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Workplace Learning and Adult Basic Skills: Enhancing Skills for Life

Project conducted over the same period,
looking specifically at workplace experiences:
also collected data relating to ETPs and
ULRs



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Project structure

Direction & staffing

- Professor Alison Wolf
- Professor Karen Evans
- Dr Liam Aspin
- Dr Ed Waite
- Dr Andrew Jenkins
- Ms Magdalen Meade
- CO-FUNDING from National Research & Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Sites and data

- 53 establishments (mostly private sector, some public sector)
- 567 learners interviewed and tested, and followed up
- Two further interviews and tests, 1 and 2 years on
- Tests of reading skills and learning orientation
- **Interviews with managers**



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Adult learners: reasons for learning

- 1:3 in ACL on SfL programmes expressed employment-related reasons that required accreditation
 - *I'm looking to further my career and maths is my weak point.*
- More often wider reasons were cited
 - *I can write notes and things like that now and do my own business...I'm much more independent now.*
 - *I come here even if I'm down in the dumps, cos it's uplifting. It's better than medication.*



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Skills for Life: benefits and problems

- Benefits
 - More money, time and staff for basic skills provision
 - *It has put basic skills on the map, on the agenda. (Curriculum Manager)*
 - *This Centre's excellent: the facilities, the friendliness, the help and support are the main things.*
 - Relationship between SfL and wider ACL very powerful (e.g. embedded provision and progression)
 - More professional and structured
- Problems
 - Highly dependent on Government funding - fragile
 - Bureaucracy
 - Target driven and targets related to accreditation - concerns about lower level learners and teaching to the test
 - *The frustrating thing is that a lot of our learners are not even nearly at Level 1 and so therefore in the eyes of these targets that we have set they do not count...but they are the people who obviously really need help. (Curriculum Manager)*



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Work-based learners: reasons for learning

- Learners in certain sectors (e.g. Care) needed NVQ accreditation to keep their jobs
 - *We will not be allowed to work without the constant update.*
- Others felt learning and accreditation would help with employment in the future
 - *It's just to give me more job prospects in the long run*
- But many wider reasons not requiring accreditation (e.g.
 - Wanting to help children with homework
 - *If you are living in this country, you've got to know everything about the language.*
 - *To prove I could still think for myself instead of being stuck on a line chopping potatoes*



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Learning at work:benefits and problems

- Benefits
 - Flexible and convenient
 - Free
 - Union Learning Representatives - 'safer' and trusted, provided on-going support and encouragement
- Problems
 - Often short-term - 'flowers in the desert'
 - Tensions between working and learning
 - No guaranteed reward for accreditation or learning
 - Few progression possibilities



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Workplace provision requires employer and manager collaboration

- This can be minimal – as when employers simply organise a room for learners to use, outside work time, with an outside provider
- Or maximal – as when employers originate a programme of learning, contribute directly to its provision and/or allow paid time off to learners



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In prioritising workplace provision, government policy-makers assumed major basic-skill related ‘gaps’

- Neither employers nor learners in our sample agreed –
- Although they did want/appreciate government-funded **ESOL** provision for work-related reasons

Reasons for facilitating training: possible reasons offered to managers

- Improve job skills
- Improve soft skills
- Offer general development to staff
- Increase staff morale
- Reduce number of errors at the workplace
- Reduce absenteeism
- Reduce staff turnover
- Improve health and safety
- Increase staff confidence
- Help staff to be receptive to change
- 'Other'



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Managers' responses

- On average, 7 of the 10 alternatives were identified as relevant. However, only half included job-specific skills in this list.
- Then asked for the single most important. Only two - both managers of care homes - identified job-specific skills in advance as the most important
- Afterwards, almost all managers identified 'greater confidence' as the most important outcome achieved although a small number pointed to improved job-related English of ESOL learners as the most important



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Workplace provision was very short-lived

- It was most often initiated through cold-calling by providers; or because of active ULRs with funding from the Union Learning Fund
- Once external funding was exhausted the schemes closed
- 10% of the sites themselves closed/moved over a two-year period, even though the provision was concentrated in large, unionised enterprises
- The provision that endured was provision that was initiated by the organisations themselves, and where SfL was added to a pre-existing structure

Policy lessons (1)

- Adults' reasons for learning are diverse and are often not simply related to learning for employment or accreditation.
- Accreditation has its own rewards - these are often not extrinsic.
- The link between accreditation and targets has unintended and even perverse effects.
- It is not just about attracting learners in but ensuring they achieve and progress - the relationship between learners and tutors is paramount
 - *'It's a lot of responsibility. It's people's second chance...a really big step. They've had a really, really negative self image for a long time and you have got to get it right, because if you get it wrong, they are not going to try again.'* (Tutor)
- Continuity of funding, safeguarding of tutors and sites and a recognition that second chance learning takes time.



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Policy lessons (2)

- Governments' conviction that it knew what companies and employers needed and wanted was misplaced.
- If provision is not genuinely 'demand-led' it will not survive
- It is logistically very difficult to deliver formal learning in the workplace
- Employers do not find the outcomes of SfL worth paying for directly; equally the 'catapult' model employed is a very expensive one