

THE FUTURE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: A NATIONAL STRATEGY

WORKPLACE LEARNING: A SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS AT THE EXPERT SEMINAR AND COMMISSIONERS' MEETING

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is a summary of the key issues raised during rich and wide ranging discussions at the Workplace Learning Expert Seminar on 21 November and the Commissioners' meeting on 27 November. It is inevitably selective, but seeks to identify some of the main messages and challenges from the discussion and to highlight pointers for further research.
- 1.2 The discussions raised a number of points, which apply not only to the workplace learning theme, but to the Commission overall:
- The importance of finding new and appropriate language to talk about lifelong learning and people's jobs;
 - The need to join up issues and understand the connections between themes in policy and conceptual terms;
 - The importance of preserving critical judgement, ensuring the Inquiry's findings are critically reasoned and rooted in robust evidence;
 - The need to consider the implications of forthcoming, as well as existing policies, for example the move to a census of achievement at 18 announced in the Queen's Speech which, amongst other things, will bring the UK more in line with Europe.
- 1.3 In introducing the seminar, David Watson established 'workplace' as a theme that would be present throughout the whole Inquiry, both as a platform, and a site, for learning. He located the importance of the seminar in the contexts of the move to a census of achievement at 18, the current skills discourse presented by the Leitch review, and the global economic context within which this sits. He posed four questions as a framework for debate:
- What are the dynamics of learning within the workplace?
 - What works?
 - What needs to be fixed?
 - What are the levers for doing this?
- 1.4 The programme for the seminar, with details of the contributors, is attached at Annex 1. The supporting papers from the seminar are available on the Inquiry website at www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk/themes/globalisation

2. Issues

2.1 The presentations, responses and discussions reflected a range of perspectives. Although the issues outlined in this paper are presented under the following headings, they also cross-refer:

- Wider contexts for workplace learning
- 'Sophisticating' Leitch
- Demand and Incentives
- Priorities and Funding
- The Role and Value of Qualifications
- Informal Learning

2.2 Moreover, they are underpinned by a concern, recognised at both the seminar and the subsequent meeting, to respect people's learning and work experiences through language that is sensitive to the implications of labels such as 'ordinary jobs' and 'unskilled work'.

3. Wider Contexts for Workplace Learning

3.1 'Right-sizing' workplace learning should be a key concern for the Commissioners, in two respects. Firstly, in the context of the scope of the Inquiry to consider the future of lifelong learning, workplace learning is a key dimension of lifelong learning but people learn for other purposes and in other settings and the Inquiry will need to reflect this. Secondly, the prevailing policy discourse around workplace learning makes strong links between skills and productivity; but there is a need to understand the relationship between the two.

3.2 Both Ewart Keep and Michael Davis argued for greater recognition in skills policy that skills are, in fact, only one of the six key drivers for productivity: employment, enterprise, innovation and creativity, skills, competition, investment in infrastructure. While government has loaded greater expectations onto the role of workplace skills and qualifications for adults in improving productivity, the theoretical and evidence base underpinning this policy is not always robust. Yet paradoxically, some of the research-based evidence of connections between learning and work, such as the value of connecting learning to workplace organisation, are not reflected in public policy.

3.3 There are also tensions for a skills policy which, for example is judged on the one hand in part through its contribution to increasing levels of productivity (through a measure of Gross Value Added (GVA) per head, and on the other is expected to contribute to improving the employment rate, drawing under represented, disadvantaged groups into the labour market and probably reducing levels of productivity per head. This raises questions about the extent to which the priorities of three key government departments are aligned: Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR) which leads on promoting economic development and raising levels of productivity; Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which leads on reducing rates of economic inactivity; and Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS) which leads the Government's work towards 'world class skills'. It was noted in discussions that

the UK does not have a research institute or 'think tank' body that takes as its focus the applied study of the relationship between learning and work.

- 3.4 The relationship between active labour market policies, workplace and lifelong learning will need further consideration by the Commission when it discusses the relationship between learning and poverty reduction and would also benefit from comparative studies with other European countries, including Germany and Denmark. As the Inquiry develops, the themes of demography and migration, social justice, the impact of technology, notions of place, and international comparisons, will also need to be considered in terms of their implications for, and impact on, workplace learning.
- 3.5 However, the Commission was urged to be cautious in the claims that it makes for the impact of adult learning on wider society, and to be circumspect about what education and training can deliver, on its own, in the face of existing wage, employment and societal structures.
- 3.6 A recurring issue at the seminar was the changing structure of the UK economy and whether it is characterised by an hourglass or flowerpot-shaped labour market. This should be an area for further investigation by the Commission, in particular to map labour market models against the profiles of demographic change - for men and women (there is some evidence to suggest that the female labour market may be hourglass shaped and the male labour market more shaped like a flowerpot), young and old and to understand in more detail sectoral differences in labour market models. Allied to this was a concern to understand more about the changing nature of work and jobs, taking care not to pre-judge the value of different kinds of jobs.

4. 'Sophisticating Leitch'

- 4.1 Both the seminar and the commissioners' meeting expressed the view that the analysis and broad ambitions of the Leitch review should be strongly supported through the Inquiry. There was a shared acknowledgement that the Government is investing significantly in adult skills, although some scepticism in relation to how far current government targets are the best measures of progress in meeting these ambitions, particularly in light of experience in both Scotland and Canada where qualification gains have not been accompanied by similar rises in productivity.
- 4.2 As a consequence, it will be important to ensure that the pursuit of the Leitch goals is taken forward in a way that is meaningful and adds value to both employers and individuals. The Inquiry will also need to address the failure within Leitch to provide a strategy for those not in paid employment.
- 4.3 A recurring theme in discussions was the tension between the current broad, national, macro-level policies and analyses; and the complex realities of local, regional, sectoral, occupational, gender, ethnic and class-based differences. A 'Leitch Plus' approach was advised, which should develop a structured sensitivity, or 'market segmentation' approach to these different contexts and consider how policy can be framed in ways that allow it to engage with these different needs.

- 4.4 A key challenge for the Inquiry was how to secure an appropriate balance between a nuanced or highly targeted approach on the one hand, and one that continued to offer broad-based opportunities to move forward workplace (and lifelong) learning on a range of fronts.
- 4.5 Of further concern in relation to the government's response to Leitch is that the current balance of investment may not have secured a model to drive up employer investment. At the same time the collateral damage to other publicly funded learning provision has not only been considerable in itself, but may also impact on workplace learning, as illustrated by a fall in levels of participation among part time workers.¹

5. Demand and Incentives

- 5.1 A key conclusion was that much more attention should be paid to demand for learning (as opposed to supply of learning), both from learners (employees) and employers, including ways of measuring it; what kinds of frameworks, interventions and incentives best encourage it; and how best to support it. The shift in emphasis in Scottish policy away from a focus on increasing and improving the supply of skills and qualifications, to an emphasis on stimulating demand for learning from employers was noted as an interesting point of comparison.
- 5.2 There were calls for a critical look at the genuine employer demand for the massive injection of qualifications that the Leitch targets aim to deliver: Michael Davis asked 'what if our collective aspiration for skills is greater than the demand from business? What can practically be done about it in the 13 years up to 2020'?
- 5.3 The ability of 'internal levers' available within the learning and skills system, such as Train to Gain, to secure the culture change that Leitch aspires to was questioned. Ewart Keep's paper suggested 'external incentives' (e.g. wage returns, labour market regulation, tax incentives) may be more significant in stimulating demand for learning, from both employees and employers. Understanding the relative contributions of 'internal' and 'external' levers to encouraging demand for learning was identified as an area of further investigation.
- 5.4 Other possible incentives for employers to invest in learning were noted: public procurement strategies, including requirements for Investors in People; an annual reporting requirement related to training and development; and the proposed strengthening of young people's right to time off for study, linked to proposals for a census of achievement at 18.
- 5.5 However, market-driven incentives were considered to be one part of a broader approach to encouraging demand, which should also recognise the value of and seek to shape society's attitudes to and people's motivations for learning. And at

¹ Aldridge and Tuckett (2007) *The road to nowhere?* NIACE: Leicester

organisational level, opportunities to develop social partnerships that bridge the gap between obligation and voluntarism should be further explored.

- 5.6 If demand from employers and employees is stimulated, Michael Davis' third question challenged us to think about what changes would need to happen to the delivery infrastructure and qualifications to be able to scale up, but in a way that provides genuine learning opportunities reflective of how adults learn within their work? The following two sections discuss responses to these questions.

6. Priorities and Funding

- 6.1 There were calls for the distinction between the social and economic arguments for investment in learning in the workplace to be better understood and used to inform a more sophisticated analysis of who should pay for what, including where public money is best spent, on what provision and for whom? The key message from employers was that, where qualifications are important, it is basic skills and level 3 skills that carry an economic premium, whilst others argued that the social case is strongest up to level 2, which then provides a key springboard for progression to level 3, though this depends partly on empirical evidence and forecasts about whether the future is hourglass or flowerpot shaped.
- 6.2 Within those sectors characterised by an hourglass economy, where the gap between low level and economically productive skills is significant, it will be important to identify progression pathways between top and bottom, and to assess the returns of making this journey, to the individual and firm, as well as at a macro level.
- 6.3 Although it is early in the Commission's work to be considering possible funding recommendations for a strategy for lifelong learning, the following issues raised at the seminar are noted for future consideration:
- Should we re-cast Level 2 in favour of focusing on basic skills and working towards a proper Level 3 entitlement, featuring Level 2 as a milestone on a learning journey, rather than *the* destination?
 - Is Train to Gain as a blanket programme on such a large scale a good use of scarce resources?
 - What opportunities might there be to look at tax breaks for learning for SMEs and their employees?
 - Currently, the funding system retrospectively funds activity of key providers, especially FE colleges. What opportunities might there be to move to funding capacity to use strategically?
 - Could the 80:20 split between nationally determined and locally responsive priorities for adult learning, recommended in the NIACE Commission 'Eight in Ten' also apply to workplace learning?
 - How do we develop smart provision and smart take-up of formal learning. What are the 'infrastructures' which deliver most value?

7. The Role and Value of Qualifications

- 7.1 There was broad consensus about the need to unpick the multiple meanings used when stakeholders talk about the role and value of qualifications. The importance of qualifications varies across sectors, and between employers, with levels of qualification most likely to reflect skill levels within sectors that operate a licence to practice.
- 7.2 The important distinction between the role of qualifications in sifting, confirming and supporting career change was recognised. Qualifications can often be critical at the point of entry, but not vital in themselves, a priori, to career enrichment when workers are already established within a sector or a company. Furthermore, employers can be often confused by the array of qualifications available, and have little understanding of the knowledge and skills that they can expect from employees with particular qualifications. Instead, employers may use qualifications as a proxy for willingness and ability to learn.
- 7.3 In contrast, employees often value the opportunity to have their learning accredited, with qualifications often seen as being extremely valuable in recognising competence and securing progression, thereby acting as a key benefit of workplace learning for individuals. Even here though, qualifications are often used as a confirmer of, rather than a driver for, change. The concept of accredited qualifications as an 'employee benefit' was explored. A key challenge for the Inquiry is better to understand the relationship between qualifications and progression in the workplace and to secure appropriate progression pathways.
- 7.3 Research shows that qualifications are by no means the sole dynamic at play in workplace learning. The greater value placed on tacit and experiential learning, within many areas of the UK labour market, and among many employees has implications for the balance of public investment in, and interplay between, informal learning and more structured learning opportunities.
- 7.4 Adults' engagement in learning is often incremental, short cycle and cumulative in nature, with many adults adopting learning routes that challenge more traditional ideas of progression (more akin to a climbing frame, rather than a ladder of opportunity). The focus on whole qualifications within the Leitch targets, thereby risks privileging those with least intensive pressures in the workplace and with least alternative pressures on their time outside of it.
- 7.5 The concept of homogenous qualifications was strongly challenged, particularly around 'level 2' qualifications, which were considered to be in need of reform. It was suggested that it was meaningless to equate GCSE qualifications in Maths and English with some vocational level 2 qualifications.
- 7.6 The strengths and weaknesses of qualifications as a measurement tool were discussed. While they may work well for younger adults as a proxy for skills, this is less true for older adults, who also bring a range of valuable experience to their role. The complex relationship between qualifications and other levers of productivity, such as the wider economic environment, the organisation of work, and leadership and management skills, needs to be better understood in order to

ensure that qualifications do not become a distraction from the wider purpose of creating a rich learning environment within workplaces.

8. What is Learning at Work?

- 8.1 The Inquiry was challenged to open up a debate around 'what is learning and what enhances learning?' Alan Felstead explored the constructs of 'learning as acquisition' - of skills and knowledge - and 'learning as participation' - tacit learning developed through action, in context, and borne of social interaction. Evidence from employers suggested a move away from formal training and the growth of more on-the-job activity such as coaching and mentoring. The Commission was challenged to consider what an enabling, expansive pedagogy for workplace learning would look like, particularly as it was noted that the increasing 'professionalisation' of the lifelong learning workforce seems to have been accompanied by a narrowing of pedagogy.
- 8.2 Linked to this there were strong arguments for the role of workplace learning to be better understood in relation to strategic business priorities and workplace structures and arrangements. The economic case for learning at work rests on a range of associated changes (e.g. employers showing they value employees resulting in greater employee engagement, clearer and fairer competency and progression requirements), which accompany learning, as much as the learning itself.
- 8.3 This has implications for how employers develop their approaches to workplace learning and the support they need, for example, in thinking about how to re-organise work to realise the skills and talents of employees and how to connect learning and business support. It was recognised that learning at work should not just be about upskilling, but for older workers, also relates to reskilling for new and different roles. The key role of line managers in supporting learning in the workplace was identified, however, it was also acknowledged that employers' or line managers' own qualification levels can sometimes be a barrier to supporting effective, embedded learning at work. Equally, the role of intermediary organisations, or brokers, in advising employers about learning, skills and qualifications was seen to need further development so that brokers were effectively able to offer holistic business support advice, including advice about skills. The importance of complementing whole organisation approaches for larger employers with more individually focused approaches for smaller organisations was noted as one example of the need to differentiate support for employers by size, sector and occupation.
- 8.4 Lorna Unwin introduced the concept of expansive and restrictive workplaces to illuminate how expansive workplaces can transform everyday learning at work into a vehicle for innovation and growth. Commissioners wished to understand what policy levers might encourage the development of more expansive workplaces, or learning organisations. While this was seen as an important area for consideration, some caution was urged. Firstly, some commissioners were keen to seek further evidence of the impact of expansive workplaces on individuals' learning and development, off-the-job as well as on-the-job; and employers' wider business aims and objectives. Secondly, Commissioners were encouraged to respect and value 'ordinary' jobs. Thirdly, Lorna Unwin reminded

Commissioners that much learning at work is not even on the policy radar, and that it could be counter-productive to seek to frame (or constrain) employers' own business and learning practices too closely in policy terms. There are related issues to explore about the relationship between the state, public policy, and the private and third sectors which will be the subject of a later Commissioners' discussion.

- 8.5 The nature of learning at work and the discussions about the role and value of qualifications were illuminated by consideration of unions' role in promoting learning. On the one hand, the TUC reported workers demand for tangible outcomes and qualifications from their learning, on the other, the experience of the Union Learning Fund and Union Learning Reps suggests the growth of and support for tacit, modest, mentored learning activity, not all of which is work related.
- 8.6 A challenge to be addressed by the Inquiry will be to understand how best generic skills can be generated, and whether a more effective workplace learning strategy would strike a different balance between vocationally specific and other forms of learning, particularly in a design-rich, innovation centred economy.

9. Next Steps / Proposals for further research

9.1 The call for evidence on workplace learning and discussions were based around 7 key questions:

- What sort of learning do employers invest in and why?
- What evidence is there on the returns to workplace learning?
- What role do qualifications play in the workplace?
- What are the future skills needs in the workplace?
- What impact does work organisation and leadership have on the development of adult skills?
- How do funding structures and regulation affect opportunities to learn in the workplace?
- How does each of the above vary by sector, region and age of employee?

9.2 The NIACE Inquiry team's next step will be to review the detail of the seminar and commissioners' discussions and the evidence that has been submitted against each of these questions and the additional three core Inquiry questions that have recently been introduced:

- What does the evidence tell us about the impact of lifelong learning in the workplace?
- Where are the gaps in evidence in relation to this theme?
- What key messages for the Inquiry we should extract?

9.3 This paper identifies a number of areas for further investigation, including:

- whether 'we are trapped by the industrial sociology'? If labour market models are influenced more by the structure of the economy and society than by learning and skills interventions, what are the implications for motivation and

progression? How do we understand the complex relationship between skills levels and wages?

- what is the labour market model (i.e. hourglass or flowerpot) on which the Commission should be basing its recommendations for the future of lifelong learning? How does this differ in relation to gender, age, sector etc?
- what is the demand for learning from employers and employees? How can it be measured, encouraged and supported?
- what is the role of different types and levels of qualifications at different stages of the life course, and what is their value to individuals and employers?
- what is the evidence of the economic and social benefits of investing in basic skills, level 2 or level 3 qualifications, in different vocational / occupation areas?

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 The Commission is keen to encourage further debate on the issues raised in this paper. Please contact the Inquiry team at lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk.

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