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Skills for Scotland: Learning in and for businesses

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**SKILLS FOR
SCOTLAND**

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Introduction

This briefing presents the findings from a project which examined the development and impact of learning initiatives aimed at upskilling the Scottish workforce. The project was part of a European Union ESF funded project entitled Skills for Scotland which was managed by Adam Smith College. It consisted of 13 partners which included colleges, voluntary organisations, trade unions and universities (<http://www.skillsforscotland.org/>). Twelve of these partners were developing learning programmes. The role of the research team was to work with two partners within the Skills for Scotland group to examine the impact of some of their courses. The first of our partners was a Scottish college developing soft skills courses to be delivered to employees of local companies. The second partner was a trade union involved in delivering English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) to immigrant workers. In total, we observed four courses, interviewed 42 course participants and 14 line managers, as well as a small number of trade union officials, union learning representatives and college lecturers. The aim of the research was to investigate participants' and line managers' views of the courses and how the experience of participating in such courses influenced individuals both within and outwith the workplace.

Aims and Objectives

The main aims of our project were to:

- provide an overview of Scottish policy and the literature on workplace learning;
- investigate the process of developing courses specifically aimed at those in the workplace;
- examine the impact of learning tailored to the needs of the workplace on course participants, employees and businesses;
- examine the role of union learning representatives in supporting workplace learning; and
- explore the value of using accredited units of learning that can provide stepping stones to further qualifications.

Main findings

- Government policy is increasingly stressing the role of the workplace in learning and the need for businesses to develop workplace practices that encourage learning and make best use of people's skills. Although Scotland has a high proportion of graduates in its workforce, it also has a relatively high proportion of early school leavers with few formal qualifications in comparison to other Western European countries.
- According to recent surveys, workplace learning is most likely to be offered to those already highly qualified.
- In our project, the employees (the learners) worked for diverse organisations in the private and voluntary sector, including construction firms, care homes and a bus

company. The employees also varied in terms of previous qualifications. Around a third had degree level qualifications or equivalent. Several had left school with few formal qualifications but the majority had gained later, mainly vocational, qualifications. Learners participating in the soft skills courses differed in motivation and generally those with a higher level of formal education were more motivated to participate.

- Virtually all of the learners identified benefits from attending the course although their accounts of what they had gained varied. Employers from a range of different types of businesses also spoke of positive benefits of the course.
- Learners from companies with a positive attitude to training gained more from the course as they were better supported and had more opportunities for putting learning into practice in the workplace.
- The companies with strong learning cultures also seemed to have coped with the recession better than the companies with a weak training culture. Whilst it is not feasible to argue for a causal relationship between specific training programmes and the ability of a company to weather a recession, it could be argued that developing more effective work practices, such as those encouraged by the soft skills courses, may help companies to deal with the turbulence of the economic climate.
- With regard to one of the courses studied (the ESOL course in the bus company), union learning representatives played an important role in brokering and mediating learning in the workplace. This was supported by an effective partnership between the union and the company. There were clear benefits to the company as the learning centre also offered the opportunity for some of the essential training to take place in the learning centre situated in the workplace. The flexibility of the provision to fit in with shift work allowed access for many who would otherwise have found it difficult to attend classes.
- Learners on the soft skills courses were less concerned about gaining a nationally accredited qualification than were the ESOL learners in the bus company.

Background and context

The policy context

The workplace is recognised as an important place for learning in the government lifelong learning strategies. The second strategy published in 2007 put an increasing emphasis on skills development and the need to develop a cohesive system for the provision of skills across the lifespan ([Scottish Government, 2007a](#)). It had strong links to the economic strategy which makes a commitment to creating a Scotland that is a smarter, wealthier and fairer country (Scottish Government, 2007b). The Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth ([Scottish Government, 2010a](#)) retained the aims of the 2007 strategy with added emphasis on the importance of raising the ambitions of firms, encouraging employee engagement and developing workplace cultures that enable people to develop and best use their skills ([2010a: 41](#)).

Increased immigration to Scotland, largely from other parts of the EU, required the development of policies focused on the economic and social integration of recent arrivals.

This led to the development of a strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) which focused specifically on those living and working in Scotland and whose first language was not English. Special emphasis was placed on learning English for the workplace and the ability of unions to reach employees most in need of developing their skills was noted in the action plan linked to the strategy.

Qualifications and training in the Scottish workforce

Scotland has a high proportion of people in the working age population with degree level or professional qualifications ([Scottish Government, 2010b](#)) in comparison to the rest of Europe; however, it also has a relatively high proportion of school leavers with only lower secondary education. These data suggest that inequalities occur at an early stage with a relatively large proportion of young people leaving school with low qualifications, compared to other European countries. The National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2005 Scotland Report ([Ormston, et al., 2007](#)) shows that those with low qualifications continue to be disadvantaged as they have fewer opportunities to access learning later in life.

Employer skill demand

Skills shortages identified in the employer survey ([Scottish Government, 2010c](#)) are relatively low but they affect smaller businesses to a greater extent than larger ones. They are most common amongst skilled trade occupations, sales and customer service occupations and machine operatives. The majority of skills shortages identified by employers were soft skills. Skills gaps among those in employment were most common among sales and customer service staff, personal service staff, skilled trade occupations and elementary staff. The main skills gaps identified by employers were in soft skills, similar to skills shortages.

Businesses were most likely to offer training to those already highly qualified and larger business provide more training than smaller businesses. Employers' main reason for not training was that staff were considered to be fully proficient. The most commonly used training providers were private training providers/external consultants (66%) followed by own staff (48%). FE colleges were only mentioned by 23% and universities by only 10% of employers.

Workplace learning: the literature

Research (e.g. [Ahlgren & Tett, 2010](#); [Billett et al., 2006](#); [Rainbird et al., 2004](#); [Tett et al., 2006](#)) has shown that locating learning in the workplace can make it much more accessible to employees, particularly for those that have not had a very positive experience of schooling. This is because it draws on familiar practices that can boost employees' confidence and so when advice, encouragement and support is provided workplaces can function as 'safe' environments that encourage people back into learning ([Findlay et al., 2007](#)).

Learning is shaped by the diverse ways in which individuals elect to engage in workplace activities and workplaces themselves offer different learning environments that can range from the 'restrictive' or 'reactive' to the 'expansive' ([Fuller & Unwin, 2004](#); [Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012](#)). In an expansive environment, learning for the whole workforce is developed, employees are seen as an asset to the company and there is a belief that everybody can learn. Reactive environments have low levels of training and training occurs only when it is unavoidable.

Access to learning is influenced by organisational structures especially in relation to people's occupational positioning and status within an organisation. A study by Ashton ([2004](#)) found that senior staff were expected and encouraged to learn. In contrast the learning of more junior staff was predominantly task-focused and was effectively constrained by the organisation. Illeris ([2011](#)) stresses the two-way relationship between the individual learning process and work; the individual is influenced by work practices but interprets these practices. This leads to a dynamic interrelationship between the individual and their social context, which in turn shape workplace identities and practices.

The role of trade unions in workplace learning

As noted earlier, one of the courses was delivered by an FE college in conjunction with a trade union. Trade unions have a long tradition in promoting education for their members, although their influence was curtailed by the Conservative governments during the 1980s and into the 1990s. On election in 1997, New Labour sought to involve unions and encouraged the development of partnerships for learning between unions and employers. It set up the Union Learning Fund and provided statutory rights for Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) ([Cassell & Lee, 2009](#)). Separate measures, but with the same legislative rights, were put in place for Scotland in 2000 by the Scottish Executive through the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF) ([Findlay et al., 2007](#)).

The academic literature is divided in terms of the value of these developments between those who see the union learning initiatives as a threat to collective union practices and those that view it as beneficial ([Cassell & Lee, 2009](#)).

Methods

Data were gathered on workers' and employers' experiences of four courses, three of which were providing training in soft skills and one of which was providing training in English for Speakers of Other Languages. The views of employees' and employers' were gathered through semi-structured interviews, augmented by observations of the different learning environments. The soft skill courses were provided by a college which was located in a city on the east coast of Scotland and the classes were held in college accommodation. The ESOL course was provided on a flexible basis at two bus depots in a city in the west of Scotland and it was managed by the union learning representative.

A total of 91 interviews were conducted with 65 different individuals. Wherever possible, the forty two learners (employees) were interviewed twice in order to examine the impact of the learning on work practices over a period of time. Contact was made with the college staff and union representatives in order to gain access to the learners taking part in these courses. One of the soft skills courses was aimed at managers and the other two soft skills courses were aimed at workers in lower skilled jobs. The bus drivers who participated in the ESOL course also had lower level qualifications.

Findings: The Learning Provision – The Nature and Goals of the Courses on Offer

The college soft skill courses

The soft skills courses were based on Personal Development Award (PDA) modules accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) but were adapted to suit two

levels of learners: new managers and those with low skills. The uptake of the new managers' course outstripped available places but demand was more limited for those with low skills. In total around 300 learners participated in the courses. Learners could gain an accredited unit by completing a work-based assessment after they had completed the course.

Learners on the higher level course attended one day per fortnight over a period of 10 weeks (5 days in total). The lower level course consisted of one day per fortnight for 8 weeks (4 days in total). Both courses emphasised active learning and reflection. The course for new managers aimed to develop greater understanding of managing a team, leadership, communication, coaching and motivation. The lower level course was similar but the emphasis was on the individual's own skills and workplace practices.

English for Speakers of Other Languages organised by the ULR

The ESOL courses were offered at several levels. This included SQA accredited units that led to a nationally recognised qualification. The learning was delivered by qualified tutors in the learning centre in the workplace. The formal courses were arranged to fit in with shift patterns and were offered during two days of the week at each of the learning centres. A key aspect of the learning centre was that it offered considerable opportunity for learners to drop in and chat informally with the union learning representative as well as the tutor. The learning centres were also equipped with computers which had a range of online learning resources that allowed learners to practice language skills developed in class.

Findings: Employers' and Employees' Perceptions of the Learning Initiatives

The data from the soft skills courses were analysed according to the level of course and within each, three case studies of learners and their employers were used to exemplify the learning achieved from the course. The union-led ESOL provision was treated as a single case study.

All of the case studies demonstrated a positive impact of the courses provided. Most of the learners spoke of changes in work practices as a result of the course. Learners attending the college courses were supported by their employers in that they were allowed time off to attend the course; however, it was clear that the extent to which employees were supported to apply new skills in the workplace varied. The ESOL learners were not given time off to attend the course but the ULR support and flexible delivery in the workplace supported their learning.

The learners and their educational background

The learners on the soft skills for new managers' course differed in their levels of previous formal qualifications ranging from degree level to one learner with 1 Higher and a Diploma in Health Safety. However, most were highly qualified. On the two lower level soft skills courses, the previous formal qualifications of the learners were generally lower. However, three out of 18 participants had undergraduate degrees. The eleven ESOL learners came from a range of educational and occupational backgrounds. Several had spent some time in vocational education and four mentioned that they had started university but had not completed the course.

The businesses

The learners came from a wide range of different companies. Apart from one, they were all in the private or voluntary/charitable sector. It included companies from the construction industry, distribution, events management, a legal firm and care homes as well as a charitable organisation providing care in the community, supporting homeless people and delivering employability skills to unemployed people.

Impact of the courses

All apart from one of the learners could identify something that they had gained from attending the course. However, what they had gained varied from learning more about themselves and how to work with members in their team to learning to manage their own responses to others. Confidence in engaging with learning was important for those with few formal qualifications as was an increased understanding of the need to use different modes of communication, for example, augmenting oral instructions with written information.

The employers also spoke of positive benefits of the courses. One of them who had sent three employees on the soft skills course felt it had improved their self awareness and understanding of others, allowing them to collaborate more effectively. Other employers spoke of increased confidence in tackling further learning and an ability to tackle written reports more effectively.

Learners participating in the soft skills courses differed in motivation and generally those with a higher level of formal education were more motivated to participate. However, even those initially reluctant to participate could identify benefits from doing the course. This seemed to be particularly the case for learners who came from companies with a positive attitude to training and provided the learner with opportunities for putting learning into practice in the workplace. The differences between reactive and expansive training cultures were exemplified by two companies in the construction industry. One was a large company where the learners had low levels of motivation, the training culture was weak and transfer of learning to work practices was limited. The other was a small roofing company with a strong training culture and the, initially unmotivated, learner pointed to gains from the course in his work practice. The companies with strong learning cultures also seemed to have coped with the recession better than the company with a weak training culture. Whilst it is not feasible to argue for a causal relationship between specific training and the ability of a company to weather a recession, it could be argued that developing more effective work practices, such as those encouraged by the soft skills course, may help companies deal with the turbulence of the economic climate.

Level of support and informal learning

Companies with strong learning cultures provided their employees with opportunities to train. However, among the most highly qualified employees the level of self motivation was high. For the learners with low or no formal qualifications, the level of support and encouragement by the line managers was crucial. Another form of support was offered to ESOL learners who gained considerably from the informal learning that occurred within the day to day contacts in the learning centres.

The role of the union in learning provision

The partnership between the union and the company worked effectively in providing learning at both the formal and informal level. The union learning representative was well supported by the union and proactive in identifying the needs of the learners as well as in sourcing a range of learning opportunities. There were clear benefits to the company as the learning centre also offered the opportunity for some of the essential training to take place in that environment. The flexibility of the provision to fit in with shift work allowed access for many who would otherwise have found it difficult to attend classes.

Accredited learning

Very few learners on the soft skills courses engaged with and completed the assessment that would give them an accredited Personal Development Award. This suggests that the learning and its link to the workplace was of greater importance than a certificate. However, for some the level of the course was lower than the qualifications they already held and this may have affected their motivation to undertake the assessment. The situation was different for the ESOL learners as several wanted to do the formal assessment which they saw as a useful qualification in order to enhance their employability.

Summary and Conclusion

The initiatives reported on here clearly contributed towards the realisation of the aims of the Skills strategy and ESOL strategy. The evidence gathered suggests that soft skills and ESOL courses develop important skills in employees that are relevant to their work. It is also clear that unions and union learning representatives can play an important role in supporting learners in the workplace and in brokering opportunities for learning. However, it is also clear that the award offered needs to be at an appropriate level. Workers undertaking the ESOL courses were keen to have their learning certificated, whereas workers on the soft skills courses were not inclined to complete the assessment in order to gain the certificate. Nonetheless, they valued the learning on offer and felt that it improved their ability to perform their job.

The key challenges in developing and delivering workplace learning appear to be the following:

- engaging with and developing programmes for those with no or few formal qualifications;
- ensuring that the programme is offered at the appropriate level for participants and that the qualification on offer is at a level which will help them develop in the workplace;
- encouraging learners to engage with assessments required for accreditation of learning; and
- ensuring continuity and sustainability in course delivery, especially in the current economic climate.

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Further information

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