

Report of seminar 23 February 2011

Learning for work: the role of learning providers in widening access to learning

Introduction

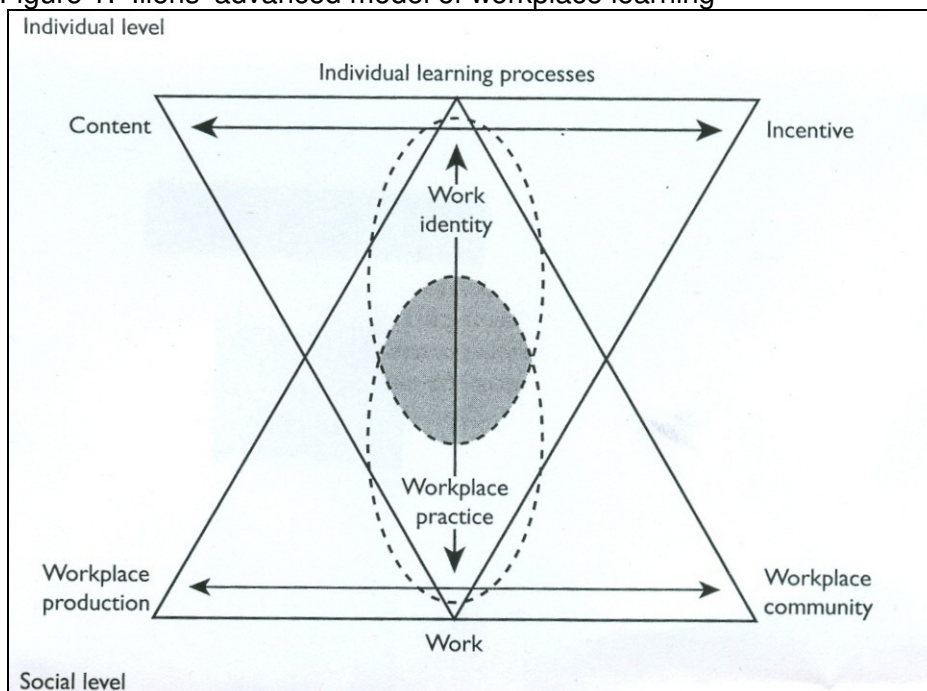
The aim of the seminar was to bring together learning providers from different settings to gain insights into how they engaged with employers and employees and how they delivered learning in or for the workplace. To set the context Briefing Paper 1, prepared and circulated prior to the event, outlined current research into workplace learning, policy in the area and provided an overview of findings from three projects on workplace learning.

This report provides brief summaries of the presentations followed by a discussion of the key issues that were raised by the participants at the seminar.

Learning for work formally and informally – an overview by Lyn Tett

Lyn highlighted the changing nature of society and the workplace and noted that adults in contemporary society need to be flexible and prepared to learn new skills. The workplace offers an effective place for developing these skills as they are directly applicable to work and provide a more informal context for learning than educational institutions. However, there is a need to be aware of the danger of such learning becoming controlled by employers and constrained to a very narrow set of specific skills that are not transferable to other contexts. The advanced model of workplace learning was used to illustrate the importance of both the individual level and the social level in workplace learning. This model argues that an effective overlap between an individual's work identity and the workplace practices leads to better workplace learning.

Figure 1: Illeris' advanced model of workplace learning



Source: Illeris, 2011

Research has shown developing partnerships with employers to support workforce development can work but it is important to develop a greater understanding amongst employers about the benefits of a better trained workforce. The need to engage employees in the development of learning programmes that build on existing knowledge and provide learning in a flexible manner all help employees to engage in learning.

Literacies for and within work: Peter Beaumont, Head of Adult, College and Community Learning Team, Scottish Government

Peter focused mainly on the development of literacies for and within work and how the government has developed strategies to deal with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The result of the Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies 2009 (SSAL) identified that around 30% of the Scottish population had some literacies challenges and about 4% within this group had severe difficulties. In addition, the survey also noted a link between literacies and low income as 14% of those at the lowest levels had incomes less than £9,500. This suggests that those in low skill and low income jobs are more likely to have problems with literacy skills which may hamper their opportunities to progress to better jobs.

The key findings from the analysis of the workplace literacies pilot projects were highlighted and these included:

- the need to make employers aware of the literacies skills required in particular workplaces and to involve employers in planning provision;
- that workplace learning programmes should be bespoke;
- that it was possible to avoid the stigma associated with literacies learning by embedding it within training for all employees; and,
- the need to ensure that provision was responsive to employer and employee feedback in a continuous process.

The new strategic guidance on literacies *Adult Literacies 2020* includes four themes:

- literacies, employability and work
- literacies and financial capability
- literacies and families
- literacies health and wellbeing

Work on adult literacies is still high on the government agenda and one of the 50 key indicators in *Scotland Performs* is focused on reducing the number of working age people with severe literacy and numeracy problems. However, it was noted that the Concordat had led to the removal of ring-fencing for specific initiatives in local authority budgets and this had left the government with reduced influence over local authority delivery of literacies provision.

Engaging employers and employees in learning: the perspective of Community Learning and Development – Claire Stewart, CLD Officer, Scottish Borders

Claire started with an account of literacies support provided for social work employees. An SQA accredited Personal Development Unit (PDU) was used as an example of the provision. Delivery of this unit included the following:

- employer negotiating the broad context of the unit;
- employee self-assessing in relation to the context and this led to the development of four tasks by the employee which related to the self-assessment and took into account feedback from a third party;
- tutor guiding the employee through the tasks and the review process; and
- new goals being identified for further development

She then outlined the experiences of delivering one of the workplace literacies pilot projects. This pilot was described as a 'short fixed term intervention'. They contacted 100 SMEs providing information about the benefits of increasing literacy and numeracy skills in their workforce; 12

companies had engaged in negotiations and courses had been provided in 7 of these companies. Claire explained that it was important to persuade employers that supporting employees in literacies learning would bring benefits to their business such as improved profit.

Engaging employers and employees in learning: the perspective of the unions – Pat Egan, Union Learning Organiser, Unite

Pat spoke of the need to make learning fun if you wanted to engage employees in learning and, that in relation to employers, it was important to develop a partnership with employers based on a learning agreement. In his view, the best employers to work with were large private companies. Local authority employers presented difficulties as the person delegated to set up the learning agreement often did not have sufficient authority to ensure that the agreement was honoured. An effective learning agreement was vital to ensure that the efforts and hard work of the union learning representative was not wasted.

He also felt that there were some problems with SVQs as they often simply rubber stamped knowledge that people already had. This meant it was important to ensure that there were opportunities for all kinds of learners, those new to learning, those wanting to get recognition for learning from their work and those that wanted to move on to higher levels.

One issue that he highlighted in relation to engaging employees was the stigma associated with literacies learning. He suggested this could be overcome by embedding literacies learning within other learning provision.

Engaging employers and employees in learning: the perspective of colleges – Kevin Clark, Project Manager, Skills for Scotland, Adam Smith College

Kevin gave an account of the Skills for Scotland project which is also outlined in Briefing 1. He explained that this project has assisted in the development of partnerships with the project partners. From the perspective of his college, it has helped the development of more flexible delivery of programmes and bespoke programmes that have the potential to be delivered drawing on the most up to date technology.

The project had led to increased contact with employers; however, he noted that it was important to develop a sustainable business model and that therefore it was not feasible for employers to expect that colleges would deliver programmes and training for nothing. It was important for colleges, especially during a recession, to ensure that they could sustain the development of programmes and this meant that businesses would be expected to contribute. He also pointed out that meeting the needs of businesses with bespoke programmes meant that the programmes were not necessarily nationally accredited programmes. This was because accredited courses do not always meet the more nuanced needs of individual businesses.

Delivering learning in or for the workplace: the perspective of the Workers' Educational Association Scotland – Shirley Howitt, Area Tutor Organiser, Glasgow, WEA

Shirley provided an overview of the way that the WEA operates in Scotland. She emphasised the democratic nature of the organisation and also that they placed the learner at the centre of the learning process. For this reason WEA tutors always start from the knowledge and understanding of the learner and build on that.

The WEA has a range of different programmes for workplace learning. These include:

- Workplace literacies;
- ESOL in the workplace;
- Job rotation in Ayrshire;
- Future Jobs Fund;
- NHS Education for Scotland; and
- Union Learning – UNISON.

Delivering learning in the workplace involved initial negotiations with all stakeholders. It was important to ensure that employers agreed to time off for learning for employees but also to ensure that this fitted in with the running of the business. Learning also needed to be customised for each workplace and be delivered by well qualified and experienced staff. WEA had developed a range of materials which they use to target both employers and employees. One key benefit of learning for the employees was increased confidence, a sense of achievement, a desire to learn further and better team spirit at work. Shirley used quotes from employees to illustrate the gains of learning and one of these showed the increase in confidence gained by one employee:

It was great that way because it got you thinking and it made me think. Nobody laughed at you for having your opinions and that's one of my fears when I open up my mouth... in case people are just mocking you. (Kathleen)

Delivering learning in or for the workplace: the perspective of the unions – James Lillis, Union Learning Representative, Unite

James spoke of his role as a learning representative in a large private bus company. The union had negotiated a learning agreement with his employers and although James still did some driving he had time off to support the development of learning within the workplace. The company has provided space for a learning centre at the depot where he works. Initially the learning centre was housed in a bus but as the activity of the learning centre grew it was moved in to the depot. The learning centre is equipped with computers provided by the employer and it acts as a social, as well as a learning space. The concept behind the social aspect of the learning space is that it provides peer support and a comfort zone for employees to encourage them to then access educational opportunities within the workplace.

In his presentation, James focused on the work he had done with the Polish drivers who had been recruited by the company as bus drivers. Although these drivers had to be able to speak basic English in order to be employed, they experienced considerable problems with local dialect when they arrived in Glasgow. ESOL learning was provided and this had been funded for a period of time through the Skills for Scotland partnership. However, one problem with ESOL programme was that it focused on standard English. This led James to develop a guide to Glaswegian to ensure that the bus drivers could understand their customers. He also developed a DVD with visual images of the different routes that the drivers needed to learn as well as photos and images to support the SVQ for Bus Drivers. The original SVQ relied entirely on written materials which were problematic for some of the non-native speakers.

Delivering learning in or for the workplace: the perspective of the colleges – Richard Ogston, Project Manager (Employability), Dundee College

Richard gave an account of a personal development/soft skills course for employees in SMEs. This had been developed as a result of being a partner in the Skills for Scotland project. A total of 320 learners had taken part in the programme which had been developed at two levels; one level focused on employees about to enter management or team leader positions; the other at those with more basic level skills. It had been intended to develop this into a wholly online programme; however, feedback suggested that the learners really valued the face to face contact. This led to the development of a more blended approach after the initial pilot which was delivered face to face in premises that belonged to the college.

Richard explained that they had decided to develop these programmes for a number of reasons:

- soft skills are considered essential to running an effective business
- bespoke provision was required which met the needs of local employers
- it offered a safe learning environment for employees which also took into account the learners preferred mode of learning
- it was a cost effective way of maximising value for both employers and employees

Overall the feedback from learners had been very positive and Richard argued that these programmes had shown that there was a demand for this kind of provision. Employees had liked

the 'off-site' location and the opportunity to meet people from other companies although this at times led to problems with attending. The employees had gained a great deal in terms of greater self awareness and ability to work more effectively with colleagues in the workplace. The diverse range of companies of the learners meant that the materials had been tested and shown to work for a range of different business settings.

Learning in or for work: some key issues

A number of issues emerged out of the presentations and were discussed at the event. Whilst these issues are covered separately below there is inevitably an overlap between them; however, the aim here is to draw out some key points.

Skills development vs learning

There was considerable discussion about the skills agenda and whether the focus on the economic perspective lead to the development of short training courses which developed skills related to specific workplace practices at the expense of broader, more general learning. The extent to which this was particularly acute for low skills employees was also raised.

There was one view that there was a tension between the employer led 'training agenda' and the employee perspective which was termed the 'learning agenda'. A number of people felt that the main way to engage employers was by pointing to the business benefits accrued from workplace learning. However, others felt that this failed to recognise social justice principles. However, the example from the Borders Community Learning and Development served to show how difficult it was to engage with SMEs. They had approached 100 employers and out of those seven eventually participated in the workplace literacies project. It could be argued that reaching those seven had a beneficial impact for both employers and employees and that, in the long run, taking a pragmatic approach to engaging with employers through emphasising business benefits can also serve the social justice agenda. The union led initiative seemed to offer an approach that had led to a 'win win' situation as the employees had access to a range of learning opportunities which reached those with low skills, whilst the employer was able to locate some of the training requirements within the learning centre provision.

Access to workplace learning and social justice

It may be acceptable to be pragmatic and point to gains for the business when employees are engaged in learning and this can be benefit some low skill employees; however, it is also important to recognise that access to learning needs to be provided for all, irrespective of their level of skills or job. The Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies 2009 highlighted the link between income and literacies skills pointing to the need for literacies learning for those with poor skills. The Adult Education Survey Scotland (Ormston, et al, 2007) highlights the impact of previous level of qualification on participation in learning. It would suggest that relying on the goodwill of employers in supporting and making opportunities available to those with low skills levels is not necessarily going to address the needs of those employees with arguably the greatest need. The government's strategic document clearly shows commitment to these employees; however, the overall financial situation and the Concordat agreement is likely to impact on the implementation of this strategy.

Partnerships

Lifelong learning policy has emphasised the role that partnerships can play in delivering learning and learning providers have been encouraged to develop partnerships with stakeholders. It was clear from the presentations that learning providers were forming partnerships of different kinds; however, there was also a sense that there was limited engagement beyond those partnerships and that the lack of a coherent approach could lead to fragmented provision. It was suggested that this was not something that could be addressed at a local level; it required national approaches, not just across Scotland but across the UK as a whole. The split between devolved powers for education and reserved powers for training (linked to the Department for Work and Pensions) and

policies within UK wide companies can lead to problems of coordinating learning provision in the workplace.

Although policy stresses the role of partnerships, the employer voice is often missing during the strategic lifelong learning consultation process of the government. This could be an indication that they do not see themselves as having a large role in skills development and also explain the lack of commitment by many employers to supporting employers in workplace learning.

Accreditation of learning

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework was developed to encourage accreditation of all learning, to develop mechanisms for recognition of learning achieved in non/informal settings and to aid transition between different learning contexts. The lifelong learning policies have encouraged the development of more accredited learning opportunities to ensure that learning achievements of individuals are recognised. However, the need to develop bespoke individualised programmes, either for individual businesses or individual learners can create a problem if the available accredited programmes do not fit the requirements. Development of accredited programmes is costly and the benefits and disadvantages therefore have to be carefully considered.

Terminology

Several speakers and participants at the seminar spoke of the stigma often attached to literacies learning. It was suggested that this problem could be dealt with by embedding it in programmes offered to all learners.

The use of the term 'soft skills' was questioned. Soft skills normally refer to teamworking, communication, leadership and customer service skills and problem solving ability (Scottish Government, 2007: 55). It was argued that it was irrelevant to make the distinction between hard and soft skills because these skills are as essential to the type of labour market that we now have as technical knowledge. However, it may be that retaining the distinction is important in order to distinguish between the types of skills required by employers. This would ensure that learning providers can respond more effectively to specific needs of the labour market. This is supported by the finding of the *Skills in Scotland 2008* survey of employers which identified that the main skills gaps were due to a lack of soft skills in the labour force (Scottish Government, 2009).

Funding, sustainability and the recession

Funding is clearly of key importance to further development of effective practice in the area of workplace learning and lifelong learning overall. In the discussion, Peter Beaumont highlighted that there were considerable financial constraints on all types of learning provision and the financial situation was described as 'acute'.

The Concordat was noted as having a particularly strong funding impact, especially on Community Learning and Development and Third Sector providers. In addition, it may also lead to very fragmented provision across Scotland as local authorities are likely to identify different priorities in their area. It has also led to the government having limited leverage in the implementation of national strategies.

European funding through the structural funds (ESF) has provided a source of funding for a range of initiatives not only for Community Learning and Development and the Third Sector but also for specific projects in colleges. However, the extent to which this will continue was questioned as the global economic crisis is impacting at several levels. The Skills for Scotland project was one example of how ESF funding had been used to reskill and upskill the Scottish workforce. As was noted by Kevin Clark, colleges can no longer afford to offer free programmes to employers; instead they have to develop a business model that makes provision attractive to employers who would then pay for these programmes.

The issue around employers' financial contributions to learning was also raised. The UK-wide Leitch review included a recommendation to seek a voluntary commitment from employers 'to train all eligible employees up to level 2 in the workplace' (HM Treasury, 2006: 4) and to change this into a statutory requirement in 2010 if sufficient progress had not been made. In Scotland there is little likelihood of such legislation as there is not strong support for it especially at a time of recession.

Whilst the seminar offered the opportunity to hear about successful workplace learning initiatives, it was clear that many of these were developed using short term project funding and some relied on voluntary agreements with employers. This raises the question about whether these initiatives can become embedded in mainstream provision.

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that the current economic climate was having an impact in various ways. It was not clear how employers that had encouraged workplace learning might react if their businesses were affected detrimentally. Will the role of the ULR still be supported with time off and will there be learning opportunities for learners in the learning centre? Sourcing funding for those that were using external, non-government funding was becoming increasingly difficult and government funding is likely to be reduced to all providers and it seems unlikely that businesses will step in to plug any gaps. The initiatives reported on here had developed some innovative programmes which had engaged employers and employees in workplace learning and this had helped to widen access. However, the gap in access and participation between those with high and those with low level of skills still exists and the current recession, with funding cuts, may serve to exacerbate this gap.

Summary

The seminar demonstrated that there was much good practice in developing and delivering learning to employees and that this also benefited employers. However, it was clear that there were considerable concerns about the impact of the recession on such provision and that spending cuts and lack of ring-fencing of budgets may have a particularly detrimental effect on those with the lowest skills. It also identified tensions between learning as a means of increasing profit versus learning as a right and a social justice matter. This tension may remain as there is likely to be an increasing expectation that employers pay for their employees' learning. If this is the case, employers will expect to see the business benefit of their investment. This was exemplified by the colleges, as one type of learning provider, and their need to develop a business approach to learning provision which includes charging employers for programmes. They also noted that this was likely to lead to more 'bespoke' programmes for specific workplaces and employers. In addition, the strong emphasis on skills was considered as potentially having a negative impact on wider learning opportunities. These developments may impact negatively on the aim of the Government's Skill Strategy to *'promote equal access to and participation in skills and learning for everyone'* (Scottish Government, 2007: 5) and that it is especially important during a recession to identify sustainable funding mechanisms to protect those most disadvantaged by an earlier lack of educational opportunities.

References

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