



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
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**SKILLS
FOR
SCOTLAND**



Learning for work

BRIEFING PAPER FOR THE SEMINAR ON: Learning for work: the role of learning providers in widening access to learning

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Introduction

This briefing paper provides brief overviews of policy and literature in the area of learning for and in work as well as findings from three recent projects related to workplace learning carried out by staff at the University of Edinburgh.

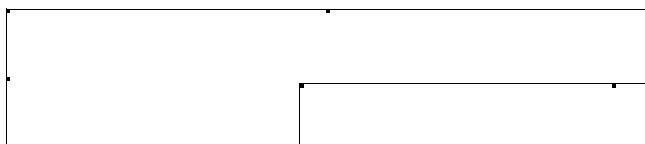
Policy and workplace learning

After taking office in May 2007, the Scottish Government identified a revised lifelong learning strategy as one of its key priorities. The new strategy *Skills for Scotland: a lifelong learning skills strategy* was published in the autumn of 2007. It had a strong focus on skills development and was closely linked to the Government's economic strategy. This strategy aimed to provide a cohesive system for the provision of skills across the lifespan. In contrast to the earlier lifelong learning strategy published in 2003 it set out duties for different stakeholders in the process of skills development. It recognised the need to develop '*strong mechanisms for clearly articulating the skills the employers need now and what they may require in the future and we need providers who can listen and who have the capacity to deliver*' (Scottish Government, 2007 p 30). In addition, it stressed the role of the workplace as a site for learning and that initiatives, such as the workplace literacies pilots, provided evidence of the value of embedding literacies learning in workplace training programmes. Provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) related to the workplace was also an area of high priority and the ability of unions to reach employees most in need of developing their skills was also noted.

The Government's *Skills for Scotland Strategy Update* (Scottish Government, 2010) continued the emphasis on the need to develop skills in the workforce and recognised the value of the workplace as an important site where people can develop and best use their skills. In particular the strategy identifies 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 (2010 p 41).

Value of learning in and for the workplace

The workplace is a special learning environment because, although learning is not its primary aim, it is the place where extensive and significant learning takes place of both a work-



oriented and general nature (Illeris, 2011). Learning at work takes place both formally, in structured learning environments, and informally through practice and exercising judgement as well as through learning from more experienced colleagues. In this section we focus particularly in the value of learning in and for the workplace for less skilled workers.

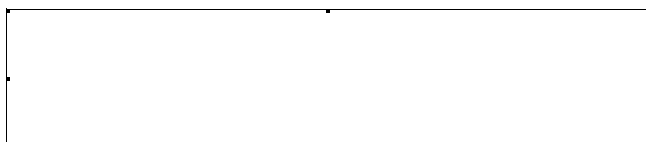
Research (e.g. Ahlgren & Tett, 2010; Billett et al, 2006; Rainbird et al, 2004; Tett et al, 2006) has shown that locating learning in the workplace can make it much more accessible to employees, particularly for those that have not had a very positive experience of schooling. This is because it draws 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). This is particularly true when workplace learning builds on the tacit knowledge that people have of their workplace practices that has been gained through doing the job and further develops their existing knowledge and understanding.

Eraut (2004) in his study of a range of workplaces found that much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities but he emphasised that this required confidence. He argued that confidence came from successfully meeting challenges in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which workers felt supported in that endeavour. Thus he suggested that there was a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence. The evidence from his research showed that both confidence in one's ability to do the work and commitment to the importance of that work were factors that affect individual learning. If there is neither challenge nor sufficient support to encourage staff to seek out, or respond to, a challenge then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn.

Learning is both a component and an outcome of individuals' engagement in work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Billett, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) because people bring a set of beliefs, and dispositions to their working lives. 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' to the 'expansive' (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). 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. These different organisational environments interact with individual's orientations to learning because people also identify with the social expectations of their 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) in terms of both what they do and how they go about it.

Access to learning is also influenced by organisational structures especially in relation to people's occupational positioning and status within an organisation. For example, Ashton (2004) found in his study of a large organisation that for senior staff learning was expected and encouraged, their learning was facilitated within the organisation and their jobs were designed in ways in which learning could be maximised. In contrast the learning of more junior staff was predominantly task-focused and was effectively constrained by the organization.

The culture of the workplace also interacts with the ways in which learning and training are delivered. Those people that have had earlier negative experiences need to have a supportive experience of learning that challenges their assumptions that they can't learn (Ahlgren & Tett, 2010). One key way in which this can be done is by building on the tacit knowledge that people have of their workplace practices that has been gained through simply doing the job. Clearly an approach that builds on employees existing knowledge and understanding is highly influenced by the workplace culture and if there is an expansive



approach to employees that goes beyond skills and reaches towards a holistic approach to learning and development then it will enable positive learning to be undertaken. Such an approach also enables people to see their future possibilities in a different way as their employers value the knowledge and experience that they bring and this promotes their own confidence in learning.

Trade unions have played an important role in promoting workplace learning for employees as part of a long tradition in promoting education for their members particularly for those that had been disadvantaged by compulsory schooling. Unions have been encouraged by governments to work in partnerships with employers to promote learning through the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF) (Findlay et al, 2007). When these funds were first set up they were used to recruit, train and develop Union Learning Representatives and this fitted in well with the Skills Strategy (Scottish Government 2007a) and the Government Economic Strategy (2007b) as these stress workplace learning and the need to upskill the workforce.

The academic literature's assessment of these developments is mixed. Munro and Rainbird found that union learning partnerships potentially allow for engagement in areas beyond the learning remit and help to develop a confident workforce who engaged more in union activity and supported workplace democracy (Munro and Rainbird, 2004). Wallis et al take a more cautious approach in that they note that ULRs have successfully stimulated demand for and engagement with learning without employer support. In that sense they have contributed to widening participation in learning; ULRs have also had some success in building effective relationships with employers. However, this has not developed at a higher level as the relationship between employers and the broader trade union movement, including the role of ULRs, has not been formalised. They also noted a certain amount of antipathy among employers (Wallis, et al, 2005).

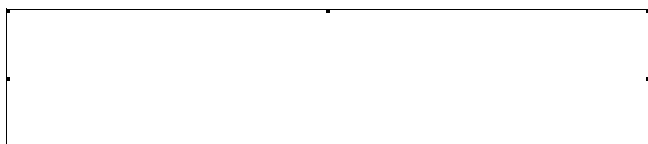
This section of the paper has focused on learning in the workplace but less is known about the impact of providing courses relevant to work that are not situated in the workplace. Initial findings from one of the projects that formed part of Skills for Scotland suggest beneficial outcomes from a soft skills course provided by one of the colleges. Employees reported improvements in communication skills, in their ability to manage their time and also in handling difficult interpersonal situations. One of the outcomes of this project is that it will provide further data which can inform learning provision.

We now turn to our findings from the three recent research projects beginning with the workplace literacies project.

Workplace Literacies Learning

This research was commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2009 to provide an overview and analysis of eight workplace literacies pilot projects in Scotland that ran from December 2006 to 2008 (Tett et al, unpublished). It used the "Awareness, Identification and Solution" (AIS) model of approach that demarcates between the three main stages of raising employers' awareness of literacies, identifying the needs of employers and employees and brokering solutions to the identification of literacies needs.

Raising employers' *awareness* of, and engaging them in, developing workplace literacies learning is influenced by their attitudes to investment in their workforces. For example, the CBI found that whilst employers were concerned about poor literacy and numeracy skills in their workforces they considered that providing training (CBI, 2008 p17) should not be their responsibility. Employers' attitudes to learning and the culture of workplaces also have an impact on the availability of learning and training opportunities. For example, a study by



Riddell and colleagues (Riddell et al, 2007) of SMEs (small and medium enterprises) found that, broadly, employers from the 'Care' sector were more likely to have an expansive approach to learning, whereas those in the manufacturing sector were more likely to have a restrictive approach. They also found that in areas of high unemployment where recruitment was easy, employers were less likely to invest in their employees.

The review of the projects showed that overcoming these difficulties involved:

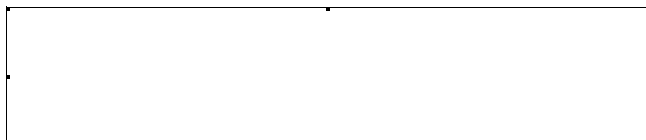
- closing the cultural gap so that the language used in communications with employers was clear and understandable;
- making initial contact through participating in other events with employers to make them aware of the services providers could offer;
- following up initial contacts so that the link between literacies and the needs of business are clear and are targeted at specific employers;
- explaining how literacies learning can benefit employers who may not be aware of the literacies demands of their workplaces.

Identifying the needs of employers and employees involves designing learning that employers and employees want and need and demonstrating the benefits of learning in the workplace. The 2008 survey of employers (Scottish Government, 2009) showed that 86% of training was job-specific, with 74% relating to Health and Safety and/or First Aid. This implies that employers are much more likely to want training that fulfils their statutory requirements rather than areas that they might not see as central to their own needs and the 'bottom line' of improved profitability (CBI, 2008).

The projects showed that overcoming these difficulties involved:

- supporting employers to identify the literacies needs of employees;
- delivering bespoke learning programmes that was tailored to meet the needs of individual employers and employees;
- capturing the views of employees;
- ensuring the learning delivered was relevant to the learners and their job roles within the workplace;
- tutors being flexible and willing to adapt the learning programmes around the logistical needs of the workplace in which they were taking place;
- incorporating materials that employees used in their everyday work.

Brokering *solutions* to identified literacies needs through the provision of information, advice and guidance involves engaging employees, identifying the literacies needs of the workplace and providing contextualised learning. Employees often develop sophisticated strategies to help disguise their literacies difficulties at work (Tett et al, 2006). This means that it is important to make sure that available workplace learning opportunities are described in ways that are acceptable to employees. For example, Jurmo, (2004) showed that avoiding the term "literacy" was important because workers would believe that programmes were only for people who could not read. Providing programmes that all employees take part in is another way that has been shown to engage employees through embedding literacies into common training that every employee undertook (Barton et al, 2007). Findlay et al, (2007) identified that partnership approaches with union learning representatives (ULRs) made it more likely that employees would engage in learning because they trust that the ULR has their interests at heart. Other research (Billett et al, 2006) has demonstrated the importance of recognising that learners bring expertise to their jobs, developed in previous jobs or in their lives outside work. Recognising employees' expertise in this way reduces stigma as it emphasises employees' skills rather than their deficits. Finally involving stakeholders, particularly



employees, in shaping the programmes to be delivered has been shown to be effective (Illeris, 2011; Jurmo, 2004).

The projects showed that effective provision involved:

- being flexible and responsive;
- allowing time to engage and gain employer commitment to literacies learning and then delivering appropriate learning programmes;
- collaboration between employers, providers and union learning representatives in encouraging and sustaining employee participation in learning programmes;
- tutors being skilled in, and committed to, workplace literacies.

Skills for Scotland

Skills for Scotland is a national project which is part funded by ESF priority 2 and is coordinated by Adam Smith College (<http://www.skillsforscotland.org/>). The project started in June 2008 and will finish in May 2011. It focuses on providing support in the training of employees in order to raise the skills of the workforce and enhance Scotland's global competitiveness. The key target groups for the project include:

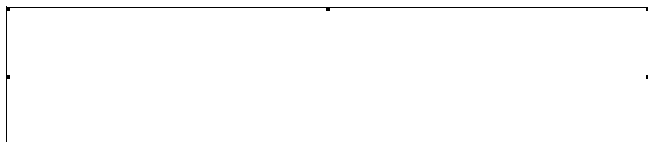
- Employees who have low skills and are low paid, including those having low levels of literacy or numeracy
- E-skills for potential new entrepreneurs and managers
- Training, mentoring and support for older workers and BME communities

The project has 13 partners from colleges, voluntary organisations, trade unions and universities. Within the project a research team based in CREID, University of Edinburgh has collaborated with Dundee College, Adam Smith College and Unite the Union in carrying out an evaluation of learning in and for the workplace. This included interviews with employees taking part in learning, employers whose staff participated in learning and learning providers. Its aims were to:

- To provide an overview of the development and current state of workforce development in Scotland with particular reference to the role of Scotland's colleges
- To examine the impact of learning tailored to the needs of the workplace on employees and businesses
- To investigate the process of developing courses specifically aimed at those in the workplace
- To examine the role of union learning representatives in supporting workplace learning

The University of Edinburgh evaluation consists of two parts; the first examined the contribution of union learning representatives in the provision of ESOL classes for bus drivers recruited from Poland and, the second which explored the benefits of three soft skill courses offered to employees in SMEs by Dundee College. The first course was aimed at employees just entering management level work and the second two were for those with more basic level skills. The data from the soft skill courses have not yet been analysed but findings from the union learning representative brokered learning indicate that:

- The learning agreement between the union and employer ensured that Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) had time within the working day to dedicate to their ULR role.
- Union Learning Representatives played a central role in brokering, managing and supporting employees into learning. In this particular workplace they also added value by supporting the formal ESOL learning by helping to the employees engage with the



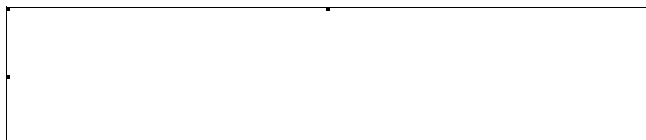
local dialect.

- Locating the learning centre and the learning within the workplace maximised the opportunities for accessing learning. The formal ESOL learning was supported by informal opportunities to use the language as well as online activities that could be accessed on the computers situated in the learning centre. In addition the ESOL tutor spent time in the learning centre which allowed for informal contact.
- The employees appreciated the learning opportunities but there were differences in their attitudes towards accredited learning with some seeing this as essential and others who felt that developing their language skills was what mattered.
- The greatest barrier to learning was the difficulty of fitting the learning in with the shift work (though situating the learning in the workplace had made it easier to attend). The tutor cited the lack of dedicated teaching space and certain equipment (e.g. for listening skills) as affecting the delivery of the course.
- Although our findings show the positive benefits of the ULR initiative in managing and supporting workplace learning, the learning partnerships between union and employers are potentially fragile as they are not supported by legislation. At the time of a recession it may be that employers are more likely to regard workplace learning as 'a negotiable and expendable extra' (Stoney, 2002) and therefore reduce opportunities.

Towards a lifelong learning society in Europe: the Contribution of the Education System (LLL2010)

This is a five-year EU 6th framework funded project including 13 partners across northern, eastern and central Europe. It aims to provide comparative research in the area of lifelong learning. The project was organised into five sub-projects. Subproject 1 examined policy and practice across the 13 countries; subproject 2 analysed Adult Education Survey data and Labour Force survey data on participation and non-participation in learning across Europe; subproject 3 consisted of a survey of 1000 adult returners to education in each of the participating countries; subproject 4 examined participation in formal education by employees in Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs); and subproject 5 explored the role of institutions in provision of learning for adults. The Scottish national report for subproject 4 included case studies in six SMEs, three of which were high skill SMEs and three which were medium skill SMEs. It was carried out in 2008 and its main findings were:

- Workplace learning is identified by UK and Scottish Governments as an important means of achieving social mobility and a more equal society. Analysis of large scale survey data at European and Scottish levels shows that existing inequalities are further entrenched by differential access to and participation in workplace learning.
- Whilst all of the SMEs in our study had a positive approach to employee development, they differed in the type of work they undertook and the composition of the workforce.
- Employees in knowledge intensive organisations were immersed in a culture where on-going learning was an expected part of working life, and was driven by both employers' and employees' expectations.
- More traditional manufacturing and training organisations had a more restricted approach to learning, encouraging employees to undertake courses which would give them the skills to do their jobs more effectively, but with less focus on their wider growth and development.
- All firms treated lifelong learning with some degree of scepticism, ultimately prioritising company profitability over individual employee development.
- Given the Scottish Government's desire to promote the demand side of skill development, the barriers posed by employers' attitudes need to be addressed, particularly in relation to lower-skilled workers in manufacturing firms, who might have



less intrinsic motivation, but are also less likely to receive support from their employer.

The report concluded that The Scottish Government has set out a bold agenda for workforce development and for stimulating employer demand for highly qualified employees. However, it was clear from our study that these company managers still nurtured some degree of scepticism about lifelong learning.

In our study, even organisations which prided themselves on their flexibility and innovation, preferred to recruit people with the necessary skills and qualifications already in place, so that they could immediately contribute to the firm's profitability without further distraction. Employees in these firms were clearly undertaking further qualifications, but this was driven by their personal interest and ambition, rather than encouragement from their employer.

In more traditional manufacturing firms, employers recognised that they were likely to have to train up their staff, but again the focus was on allowing people to gain the skills to do particular tasks, rather than a more expansive view of learning.

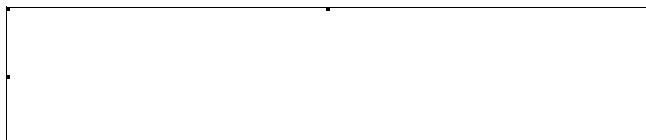
Fear of losing out in the global economy was most evident amongst employees who saw themselves competing for elite, knowledge economy jobs, rather than those who saw themselves spending the rest of their working lives in a particular manufacturing occupation. Future economic policies on lifelong learning, particularly during the present period of recession, need to take into account the barriers which continue to exist in both employers' and employees' mindsets.

Summary and conclusion

The Scottish Government's policies are broadly supportive of the development of skills in the workplace through recognising the importance of developing employees' skills and the role played by workplace culture in supporting this development. The literature shows the value of learning in and for the workforce particularly as a way of widening access to learning. It emphasises the importance of the interaction between the organisational culture and individuals' attitudes to learning and identifies the value of building on employees' existing knowledge and recognising their strengths. Developing quality learning and training therefore requires a focus on both the organisational structure in which it takes place and individuals' engagement in their learning.

Providing *workplace literacies* involves overcoming a number of challenges. At the initial stage this involves raising employers awareness of literacies needs in the workplace through targeted publicity to show how literacies learning can benefit them and their employees. Identifying the literacies needs of workplaces involved helping employers to identify the literacy needs of employees; capturing the views of employers and employees and delivering bespoke learning programmes. Finally brokering solutions to identified literacies needs through the provision of information, advice and guidance involved engaging employees, being flexible and responsive to the demands of the workplace and providing embedded and contextualised learning.

The ULRs in the *Skills for Life* project evidently played a central role in brokering and managing workplace learning. The partnership developed between the union and the company had brought benefits to those employees who chose to engage with the learning. Barriers to learning came mainly from the shift-working, however, the ULRs had been proactive in making the learning as accessible as possible. It is evident then that some union led learning initiatives through the union – employer partnerships are having a beneficial effect



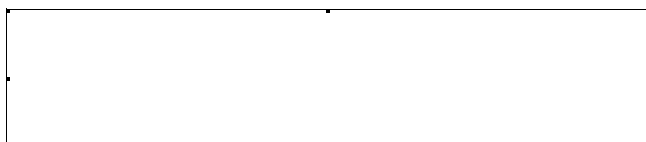
at micro level – the individual – and meso level - specific workplaces. However, the unevenness in the development of effective partnerships across workplaces suggest that unions have had limited impact at the macro level.

The *LLL2010 project* shows that there is a need for further research on the relationship between participating in workplace learning, including that leading to a qualification, and job mobility. Survey data suggests that investment in employment training enhances staff retention, however the relationship between workplace learning and job mobility is complex and ambiguous (Deardon et al, 1997). Ultimately, there may be a clash of interests between those of an individual employer, who worries about spending time and money training an employee only to lose them to another firm, an employee with an interest in enhancing their individual human capital, and the state, which wishes to increase the knowledge and skills of its citizens, regardless of the interests of individual employers.

Overall we can conclude that learning providers can widen access to learning in workplaces but this presents a number of challenges that require innovative solutions and careful collaboration between all the stakeholders involved in learning for work.

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