Skills for Scotland: Learning in and for businesses

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Content

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report 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 an European Union ESF funded project entitled Skills for Scotland which took place over a period of three years starting on 1st June 2008 and finishing on 31st May 2011. Skills for Scotland was managed by Adam Smith College and 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; our role was to work with two partners within the Skills for Scotland team to examine the impact of some of these programmes. The first partner 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 as a Second Language to immigrant workers.

The aims of our part of the 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 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 and consider the barriers to engaging in learning for employees.

Section 1: Background and Context

The policy context

The workplace is recognised as an important place for learning in the 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, 2007b). 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, 2007a). The Government's *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 that are already highly skilled 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 only by 10%.

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 and Unwin, 2004; Hefler and Markowitsch, forthcoming). 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 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 the social level; these two combine to shape particular workplace identities and particular workplace practices.

The role of trade unions in workplace learning

Trade unions have a long tradition in promoting education for their members; however, 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 and 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 and Lee, 2009).

Section 2: Research Methods

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, augmented by observations of the different learning environments and secondary data, mainly from company websites. The soft skill courses were provided by a college which was located in a city on the east coast of Scotland north of the central belt and the classes were held in college accommodation. ESOL courses were provided on a flexible basis at two bus depots in a city on the west coast of Scotland.

A total of 91 interviews were conducted with 65 different people and learners (employees) were interviewed twice, wherever possible, 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. Learners from one cohort of the soft skills for managers and two cohorts of the basic level soft skills courses participated. ESOL learners from different levels of ESOL for work took part.

Section 3: 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.

Section 4: 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, it did include three (out of 18) with 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 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 charitable organisation providing care in the community, supporting homeless people or 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 course. One of them who had sent three employees on the course felt it had provided them with relevant skills such as an ability to understand themselves better, taught them to understand others better and how to work more effectively with others. 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, 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 to 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 PDA unit 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 if they were seeking other work.

Section 5: Summary and Conclusion

The initiatives reported on here clearly contribute 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.

The key challenges to developing and delivering workplace learning that emerge from these findings are:

- engaging with and developing programmes for those with no or few formal qualifications
- ensuring continuity and sustainability in course delivery, especially in the current economic climate
- encouraging learners to engage with assessments required for accreditation of learning

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a project which examined the development and impact of learning initiatives aimed at upskilling the Scottish workforce. It explores the views of the learning providers, the learners (employees) and employers of the learners. The project was part of an European Union ESF funded project entitled Skills for Scotland which took place over a period of three years starting on 1st June 2008 and finishing on 31st May 2011. The overall project was managed by Adam Smith College and consisted of 13 partners which included colleges, voluntary organisation, trade unions and universities (http://www.skillsforscotland.org/). Twelve of these partners were developing learning programmes aimed at small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which would contribute to the upskilling of the Scottish workforce. Our role was to work with two partners within the Skills for Scotland project to examine the impact of some of these programmes. The first partner 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 as a Second Language to immigrant workers. The reason for choosing these two partners was that it allowed us to gather qualitative evidence in relation to two distinct areas of workplace learning: (i) the role union learning representatives in mediating and supporting learning in the workplace, in our case, in relation to providing English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); (ii) the development and impact of soft skills courses for those in work. Both of these have been highlighted by the Scottish Government as priority areas for skills development.

The aims of our part of the 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 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 and to consider the barriers to engaging in learning for employees.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 reviews the current policy in relation to lifelong learning and the role of workplace learning within that policy, as well as providing a brief overview of the academic literature on workplace learning
- Section 2 sets out the methods used
- Section 3 examines the perspectives of the learning providers and the role of the union in workplace learning
- Section 4 presents the views of the learners/employees and employers
- Section 5 summarises and concludes with main points emerging from the analysis

Section 1: Background and Context

The policy context

In the last two decades the emphasis on lifelong learning has increased although the notion of individuals learning throughout their life is not new as evidenced by the creation of the Workers' Educational Association at the turn of the 20th century. Around four decades ago, the Faure report (Faure, 1972) stressed the value of adult learning from a humanistic perspective. The more recent developments put greater stress on the role of learning in relation to a nation's economic development. In Scotland, lifelong learning is considered vital and is included in the economic strategy which makes a commitment to creating a Scotland that is a smarter, wealthier and fairer country (Scottish Government, 2007a).

The first lifelong learning strategy was published in 2003 (Scottish Executive, 2003); the revised strategy *Skills for Scotland: a lifelong learning skills strategy* was published in the autumn of 2007 (Scottish Government, 2007b). As the title indicates, it had a strong emphasis on skills development and employability. In contrast to the earlier lifelong learning strategy, 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, 2007b: 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. It also set out duties for a range of stakeholders including employers and trade unions focusing on the need for training and partnership building. This strategy aimed to provide a cohesive system for the provision of skills across the lifespan. It expects employers to understand how training can benefit the performance of their businesses and their staff and to become 'demanding consumers of skills'. Colleges are expected to deliver core, employability and vocational skills, work in partnerships with others, provide high quality and relevant learning and draw on labour market information. Individuals are expected to take an active role in their own development of relevant skills (Scottish Government, 2007b: 46-48).

The Government's *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth* (Scottish Government, 2010a) 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 (2010a: 41).

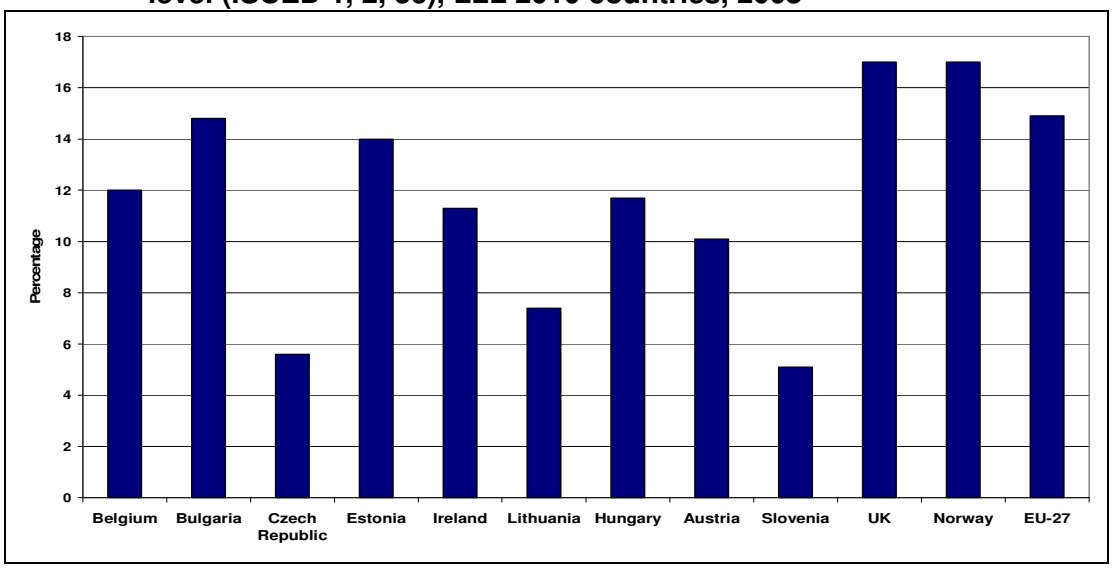
In addition to the skills strategy, increased immigration to Scotland, largely from other parts of the EU, required the development of policies focused on the economic and social integration of recent arrivals. Traditionally, Scotland has been a nation of out-migration and its population had been shrinking. However, this trend has been reversed; in 2000 in-migration was higher than out-migration and in 2010 the population was at its highest since 1974 (General Register Office, 2011). This migration was welcomed by the Scottish Government. It was encouraged by the previous administration, the Scottish Executive, through measures such as the *Fresh Talent* initiative which aimed to encourage workers from overseas to come to Scotland. It was also affected by the expansion of the EU in 2004 and the movement of workers from Eastern European countries to the UK and, to a lesser extent, to Scotland (de Lima and Wright, 2009). The largest group of Eastern European workers came from Poland and by 2009 Polish was reported as the main home language after English in Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2009). These demographic changes led to an increasing awareness of the need to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and an ESOL strategy was developed. This strategy focused specifically on those living and working in Scotland and whose first language was not English. The Adult ESOL Action Plan of 2007 included the aims to

'significantly expand ESOL provision' and to *work with employers, trade unions [and others]… to support and develop English for vocational purposes'* (Scottish Government Action Plan point 1 and 12). 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 noted.

Qualifications and training in the Scottish workforce

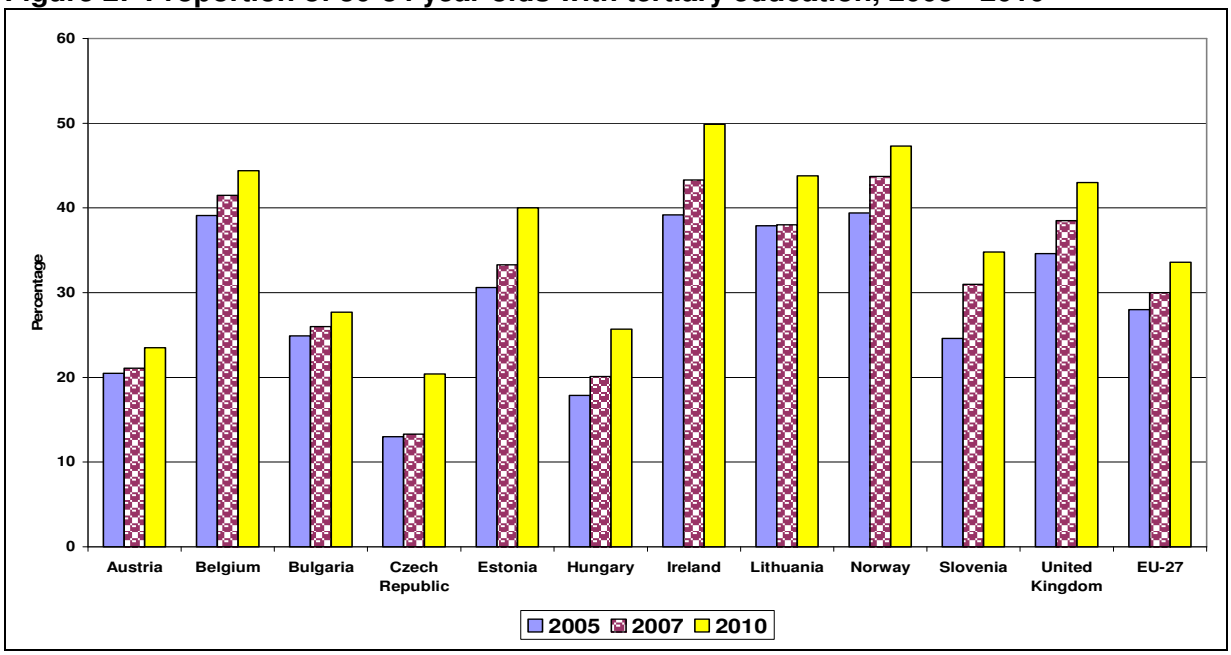
Scotland has a relatively well qualified population. In 2009 only 12.3% of the working age population had no qualifications and 21% had degree level or professional qualifications (Scottish Government, 2010b). In spite of relatively high levels of qualifications, Scotland appears to have lower economic growth than the rest of the UK and other similar small countries (Scottish Government, 2007a). In comparison with Europe, Scotland and the UK overall have a high proportion of school leavers with only lower secondary education (figure 1) but also a relatively high proportion, above the EU average, of the population educated to degree level (figure 2). This indicates an uneven distribution of skills in the workforce. A cluster of workers have either high or low level of skills and qualifications. The group of workers in the middle with intermediate level qualifications is relatively small compared to for example, Slovenia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Austria.

Figure 1: Proportion of population of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary level (ISCED 1, 2, 3c), LLL 2010 countries, 2008



Source: Eurostat, Eurostat Yearbook 2010, Eurostat, 2010

Figure 2: Proportion of 30-34 year olds with tertiary education, 2005 - 2010



Source: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/europe_2020_indicators/headline_indicators

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. These inequalities are likely to persist throughout an individual's lifetime as those with already high qualifications generally have greater access to learning opportunities in the workplace. This is borne out by figures from the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2005 Scotland Report (Ormston, et al, 2007) which show that 85% of those with SVQ level 5 (ISCED level 5) had taken part in taught learning in the 3 years preceding the survey. Of those with no qualifications (ISCED level 1-2) only 23% had taken part in taught learning. This survey also showed that 82% of those with parents who had a degree qualification were likely to engage in taught learning compared with only 63% of those whose parents left school at 16.

Employer skill demand

The employer skill survey produced by Futureskill provides further information on who gets training and what skills shortages and gaps exist (Scottish Government, 2010c). This survey examined perceived skill shortages and skill gaps and included data on training provided by companies, reasons for training as well as training providers used. A 'skill shortage' is defined as a type of vacancy that is hard to fill. A skill shortage is said to exist when an employer cannot find job applicants with the relevant skills, qualifications or experience. A 'skill gap' refers to a person already in employment whose employer deems him/her as having insufficient skills to perform their job proficiently. Although the overall level of skill shortage identified in this survey is relatively low and was seen to affect only about 3% of businesses they affect smaller businesses to a greater extent than larger ones, they were also more common amongst skilled trade occupations, sales and customer service occupations and machine operatives. Employers also identified the skills most likely to be lacking in prospective employers and the majority were soft skills such as:

- Customer handling skills (64%)
- Planning and organising (62%)
- Oral communication skills (61%
- Problem solving skills (59%)
- Team working skills (55%)
- Written communication skills (52%)

Technical and practical skills also featured (60%) but general literacy, numeracy and IT skills were not highlighted to the same extent.

Unlike skill shortages, the size of a business matters less when it comes to skills gap but generally businesses with more than 250 employees are less likely to be affected. Skills gaps were most common among sales and customer service staff, personal service staff, skilled tradespeople and elementary staff. The main skills gaps identified by employers were in soft skills, similar to skills shortages. However, it has to be noted that skills gaps are sometimes due to businesses expanding or because someone has not been in post for long and therefore not completed training. They are therefore temporary in some businesses.

The survey found that nearly two thirds (61%) of employers had funded training during 2009; employees in smaller establishments were least likely to receive off the job training and those already highly skilled were most likely to be offered training. Employers' main reason for not training was that staff were considered to be fully proficient. However, around half of the employers (48%) stated that they would have provided more training and that lack of funds (62%) and problems with releasing staff from work to do the training (51%) impacted on training. The most common length of training period was 3 to 5 days (33%) but training intensity for off the job training ranged from less than a day to more than 20 days. Most (85%) of the training was job specific or related to health and safety/first aid (72%). There was no mention of soft skills training. 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% (down from 26% in 2007) and universities by 10%.

Workplace learning

Over the past thirty years in the UK and other industrialised countries there have been major changes in the composition of the labour market. The knowledge economy and service sectors have expanded and the manufacturing sector has declined. This has been coupled with the growth of skilled as opposed to unskilled jobs (Giddens, 2006; Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2008). The latter shift has been described as 'skill biased technical change' by Brakman (2006), who has argued that production technology has favoured skilled over unskilled labour by increasing its relative productivity, and, therefore, its relative demand. Low-skilled routine tasks have become automated and demand has shifted away from low-skilled towards skilled labour that can utilise more productive technology. Globalisation clearly plays a part here too, with routine production processes increasingly taking place in less developed countries where labour is cheaper. As countries like China and India develop the skills of their population, skilled production processes may also move away from developed countries, unless the workforces of these countries are able to offer a level of knowledge and skills which cannot be found elsewhere. There are debates about the extent to which 'offshoring' is likely to have a detrimental effect on the wages and labour market opportunities of workers in developed countries, since many jobs, including services associated with homes and health, have to be provided by workers in the same location as consumers. There is also evidence that some services are being brought back to the UK because of customer complaints. The bank Santander announced that it would bring back the call centres to the UK from India (BBC news 8.11.2011). However, there is evidence from the British Household Panel Survey (Commander et al., 2006) that workers, particularly those employed as machine operators, are experiencing heightened levels of job insecurity. Recognising these perceived risks, European governments are increasingly emphasising the need to invest in the ongoing training of the working age population, and are encouraging employers to recognise the urgency and necessity of fostering workplace learning. The extent to which the government is able to communicate these messages to employers, and employees' awareness of the risks and challenges of globalisation, are likely to impact on attitudes and uptake of learning opportunities at work.

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. Hefler and Markowitsch (forthcoming) developed a similar framework but referred to reactive and expansive environments. Reactive environments have low levels of training and training occurs only when it is unavoidable. Expansive environments on the other hand optimise training opportunities (see table 1). Hefler and Markowitsch have added to this a typology of the level of support offered to staff which ranged from ignoring an employees engagement with learning to integrated support.

Table 1: Reactive versus Expansive Training Cultures – Defining characteristics

Reactive Training Cultures	Expansive Training Cultures
Training mainly seen as a cost factor and therefore minimised	Training is understood as an investment with significant value added
The average training activity (over a multi-year period) is comparatively low	The training activity is high and tends to make full use of the potential to support workplace learning
Experiences with and competences about the use of training are restricted to smaller groups of employees	Experiences with and competences about the use of training are widely diffused within the organisation, providing a framework for further improvements
Training mainly reacts to a need, the training volume depends on the increase/decrease of this need	Within an existing potential (Training Potential), the use of training and other opportunities to support learning at the workplace are optimised; changes in external requirements influence only the composition of the range of training activities, not the level of activity
Changes in external factors may lead directly to more/less training	Changes in external factors have little effect on the level of training activities

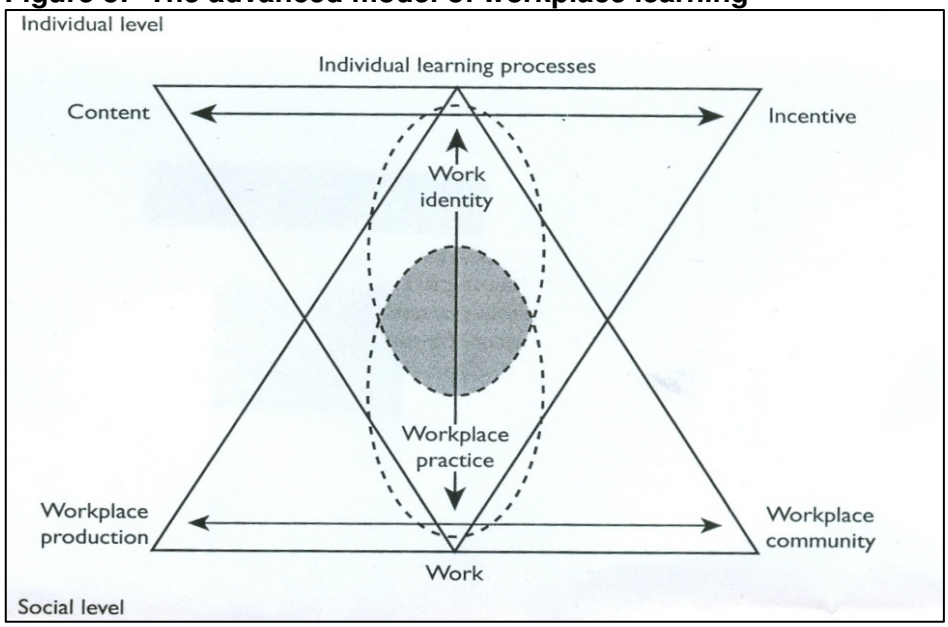
Source: Hefler and Markowitsch, forthcoming

These different organisational environments and the level of support offered 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. Furthermore, access to learning is 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 organisation.

It is evident that learning in the workplace takes place both formally, in structured learning environments, and informally through practise and exercising judgement as well as through learning from more experienced colleagues. Although the main purpose of the workplace is production, it has for reasons outlined above, gained in importance as a learning environment. In the advanced model of workplace learning, Illeris has captured the individual as well as the social aspect of learning (Illeris, 2011). Illeris argues that it is in the shaded part of the model (see figure 3), the joining up of work identity with workplace learning practice, where transformative and accommodative learning occurs. Illeris 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 the social level; these two combine to shape particular workplace identities and particular workplace practices. At the level of the individual, the model also depicts the interactive relationship between the mainly cognitive element of learning found in the content and the more affective aspect of learning encapsulated by the incentive. Conversely at the social level the relationship between workplace production, the technical and organisational aspect of work and the workplace community is identified.

Figure 3: The advanced model of workplace learning



Source: Illeris, 2011: 43

The role of trade unions in workplace learning

Trade unions have a long tradition in promoting education for their members. In the 1960s and 1970s they were considered full partners alongside government and employers in a tripartite training system with an opportunity to influence educational policy relating to adult education and training. In particular, unions were seen as playing a role in ensuring access to education for those that had been disadvantaged by compulsory schooling. However, neo-liberal conservative governments during the following two and half decades brought in legislation which restricted the influence of trade unions including within the sphere of education (McIlroy, 2000). New Labour, on election in 1997, sought to involve unions to a

greater extent in the development of workplace learning whilst still retaining a neo-liberal stance. Unions were looking for a specific commitment to workers' rights to training underpinned by legislation; however, this demand was not granted. Instead New Labour encouraged unions to work in partnerships with employers to promote learning. It set up the Union Learning Fund and provided statutory rights for Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) (Cassell and Lee, 2009). This included the right to training and time off to support learners in the workplace for URLs (http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/l/q/CP03_1.pdf). 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). When these funds were first set up they were used to recruit, train and develop ULRs. In Scotland, this development fitted in well with the overall Lifelong Learning Strategy (Scottish Executive, 2003), the Skills Strategy (Scottish Government 2007b) and the Government Economic Strategy (2007a) as these all stress workplace learning and the need to upskill the workforce.

The academic literature is divided in terms of the value of these developments. Cassell and Lee overview this debate and note that critics argue that current union learning initiatives threaten collective union practices as learning and training tends to be focused on the individual and thus does not contribute to collective action (Cassell and Lee, 2009). Critics also suggest that employers are more likely to benefit than are trade unions. On the contrary, Munro and Rainbird offer the view that union learning partnerships can be beneficial and potentially allow for engagement in areas beyond the learning remit. According to their research it helped 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). Others, such as McIlroy, recognise the benefits of partnership arrangements brought about through the union learning fund; however, he points out that these accounts of success are related to specific examples. In his view they lack evidence of providing the trade union movement with greater voice over public policy in the area of employment and training (McIlroy, 2008).

In summary, there has been an increasing emphasis on workplace learning, including ESOL for work in policy documents and strategies. Statistical data show that the UK has a bipolar labour market with relatively high levels of graduates in comparison to other European countries; however, it also has a high level of low skilled workers and a high proportion of school leavers with only lower secondary qualifications. The literature on workplace learning notes the need to consider the workplace learner both from an individual and a social perspective. In addition workplace cultures have been shown to impact on the extent to which employees can engage in learning; some are reactive and offer training mainly in response to legislative demands whilst others take a more expansive view and support a wider range of learning and training opportunities. The literature suggests that individual union led learning initiatives have been of benefit to employees; however, it is argued that they have not allowed unions to influence policy in relation to workplace learning at a higher, more strategic level.

Section 2: Research Methods

The main method of data gathering was semi-structured interviews. Employees who participated in the courses, their employers (wherever possible), the course providers and union officials were interviewed. In addition we observed sessions of each of the courses and visited two of the learning centres where the union learning representatives were working. This allowed us to talk to the learners and learning providers informally.

A total of 91 interviews were conducted with 65 different people. Employees were interviewed twice, wherever possible, to examine the impact of the learning on work practices over a period of time (table 2). The number of employers participating is lower than the number of employees mainly because a number of learners came from the same company but also because it proved more difficult to engage with employers. Those who declined to take part did so mainly because of time pressure. However, in a few cases the reason was because they had just started in their post or were about to leave the company

Table 2: Total number of interviews

	Numbers				**Total**
	Soft skills		**ESOL**		
	1st interview	2nd interview	1st interview	2nd interview	
Employees/Learners	31	22	11	0	64
Employers/line managers	13	0	1	0	14
Learning providers/brokers/tutors	1	1	4	1	7
Other college staff	0	0	2	0	2
Other union staff	0	0	2	2	4
Total	45	23	19	3	91

Contact was made with the college staff and union representatives in order to gain access to the employees taking part in the courses. In the case of the soft skills courses, the researcher carrying out the observation spoke to the employees/learners on the day of the observation and asked them to participate in the project. The employees were then asked for details of their employer/line manager who was contacted and asked to take part in an interview. In the case of the ESOL learners, full-time union staff were initially interviewed and contact was made with two of the union learning representatives who worked at the bus company. The union learning representatives then identified relevant employees for us to interview.

Interviews with the learners and their line managers was challenging as it had to be fitted in with work patterns and on a few occasions it was necessary to carry out the interview on two separate days or to do it by telephone. The names of all those who participated are fictitious in order to ensure confidentiality.

The soft skill courses were provided by a college which was located in a city on the east coast of Scotland north of the central belt. All the courses were held out of the workplace, either at the college campus or in a facility in the city centre main shopping centre. The businesses were located in and around the city with some in a nearby smaller town.

The ESOL learners were employees of a large bus company with several depots in the city and across the UK. There was a learning centre at most of these depots; the one at Lakeside was the largest and acted as a hub for the other bus depot learning centres in the city; the second learning centre, Eastfield was smaller. The union learning representatives were based in these centres for most of the day. At Lakeside there was also other tutors and a steady stream of drivers coming into the centre; some to attend classes, others to use the computers or as a place to go for their break.

Section 3: Findings: The Learning Provision – The Nature and Goals of the Courses on Offer

The college soft skill courses
The courses, new to the college provision, were developed as pilots and marketed through the college's external relations group (ERG). There was a very high response for the course aimed at new managers and the college had to set up a waiting list. The response to the lower level course aimed at those with low skills was more limited. In total around 300 learners participated in the courses.

The two courses were linked to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework, with one equivalent to Higher level (SCQF level 6) and one at Access 3 (SCQF level 3). They were based on Personal Development Award[1] (PDA) modules accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) which meant that it was possible for learners to gain a SQA accredited unit through completing a project work-based assessment.

The soft skill courses for new managers included the following:

- Understanding myself and my team
- Managing change
- Leadership
- Communicating effectively
- Coaching
- Motivation

Learners 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) and drew on similar material but focused on the individual and his/her work practices. This included time management, assertiveness training and effective communication in the workplace.

Both courses emphasised active, learner-centred learning. It included some theoretical input but the main emphasis was on activities for the whole group as well as smaller group activities followed by reflection on the aims of the activity. The reflective element was followed up in learning logs that the learners were encouraged to complete. There was a strong link to the workplace with reflection both on your own learning, how other people learnt, on managing your workload and how to communicate effectively.

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 such as ESOL for Work at level 4 or level 5. ESOL courses had been delivered by the company from around 2005 when the first, mainly Eastern European migrants, started working for the company. They now accounted for around 10% of the drivers in the company. One of the union learning representatives estimated that around 90 drivers had benefited from the ESOL courses over the past 5 years.

The formal SQA courses focused on learning relevant to work and used activities which were related to work requirements such as filling in accident reports. The courses were taught by tutors with experience of teaching English to non-native speakers. At the outset of the Skills for Scotland project, a tutor employed by one of the partnership colleges worked in the learning centre; his contract was terminated part of the way through the project. The union then arranged for another tutor from a voluntary organisation to take over the delivery of the classes. All the teaching was done in the learning centre and it emphasised learner centred

[1] Personal Development Awards which are available in a range of different areas are mainly aimed at people in work.

methods. 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.

In addition to the formal courses, there was a strong emphasis on informal learning. The learning centres, which were based in the depots, acted as a drop in centres where learners could come for an informal chat or a cup of tea during their break. They were also equipped with computers which had a range of online learning resources. This included Tribal Gold which allowed learners to work at their own pace and test their learning as they went along. The friendly atmosphere in the learning centre offered the non-native speakers opportunities to practise English in an informal way. The union learning representative in Lakeside had also developed a learning pack which helped the learners develop their understanding of the local dialect. On the days that ESOL classes were taking place, the tutors stayed in the learning centre for the whole day and were available to meet learners out of class as well as in class.

There were other learning opportunities in addition to the ESOL learning in the learning centres such as literacy, numeracy and ICT. The learning centre also acted as a centre for some of the training, for example, in relation to the new ticketing machines that were being introduced. Conversational Spanish had also been introduced recently in response to a request from some of the employees. However, this other provision was not part of our evaluation and is therefore not examined or discussed further.

In summary, the union mediated learning provided opportunities for ESOL learners to develop their English language skills in a range of different ways. Formally assessed courses were available as well as opportunities to practise using the language in a number of ways. Tutors were available for informal chats as well as formal lessons.

Section 4: Findings: Employers' and Employees' Perceptions of the Learning Initiatives

This section examines the organisations and the learners that participated in the project. It is split into three sections. The first section looks at the soft skills course for new managers; the second examines the two lower level soft skills courses; and the third considers the union mediated ESOL provision. For each course case studies of companies/learners are used to illustrate the experiences of the learners and the impact of the course. Three case studies are included from the course for new managers and three for the lower level soft skills courses. The ESOL provision is treated as a single case study.

Throughout this section the employees participating in the courses are described as the 'learners'. We recognise that they were employees taking part in a short course but we use the term 'learner' because the focus here is on their engagement with learning related to work.

Soft skills course for new managers

There were eighteen learners on this course in total, seventeen initially agreed to be interviewed. However, work pressures and other commitments of three of these prevented them from participating in an interview. This led to a total thirteen learners taking part. These interviews were conducted shortly after the course finished in October 2009. Nine of the learners were available for a follow up interview which took place approximately six months after the first interview. The ages of those interviewed ranged from early twenties to late forties. Seven interviews were conducted with line managers or employers of those that had taken part in the course. As some of the learners worked for the same company, we spoke to the employers/line managers of ten of the learners. Table 3 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the learners, their place of employment and job title.

Table 3: Overview of learners by key characteristics

Name	Age band	Gender	Highest level of education	Employer	Current job title
Soft skills for new managers course					
Colin	25-34	Male	SVQ 2	Roofing company (family run)	Developing Coordinator
Sean	25-34	Male	Undergraduate degree	Event management/ video production	Senior Editor
Sonia	25-34	Female	Undergraduate degree	Event management/ video production	Production Coordinator
Alan	25-34	Male	1 Higher (Music); SVQ 3 Apprenticeship in welding	Distribution	Team Manager
Claire	16-24	Female	HND	Care Home A	Senior Carer
Craig	35-44	Male	4 Highers; Apprenticeship in electrics SVQ3	Heating and Electrical	Electrical Manager
Jane	16-24	Female	Postgraduate Diploma	Care in the community charity	Project Coordinator
Douglas	35-44	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Project Coordinator
Gordon	25-34	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Project Coordinator
Hamish	25-34	Male	1 Higher (English); Diploma in Health and Safety	Care in the community charity	Project Coordinator
Carol	25-34	Female	Undergraduate degree	Legal firm	Learning Development Specialist
Frances	35-44	Female	Undergraduate degree	Care Home B	Deputy Manager
Anna	25-34	Female	SVQ3 Health and Social Care	Care Home C	Team Leader

Case study 1

The company
The company specialised in making videos and organising events. It was set up about ten years ago by the current managing director as a one-man business in his garage. It now had a staff of around 25 people mostly in their 20s and 30s but some of the senior staff were older. Their main office was in rural Scotland but they had (at the time of the interview) recently acquired another business with offices in London. The company was part of the Investor in People scheme and had won a number of awards for its staff development. Virtually all staff were educated to degree level and a number had post-graduate qualifications.

The company differed from other similar companies in that it employed staff full-time on contracts, the majority of other similar companies relied on freelance operators. The company was described as a *'team based, almost family based operation'* by the managing director and this perception was also reflected in the interviews with other staff members. Although the recession had proved challenging and they had to lay off a small number of staff, business had picked up again, they had recruited more staff and the company was coping better than other similar businesses.

The managing director viewed education and training as vital to the business and described the business as a *'learning organisation'.* He was extremely supportive of staff undertaking training and the company would pay for it and give staff time off if necessary. However, he did also stress that it had to be *'a genuinely good course and we [the company need to] think it is worthwhile doing.* He felt that PDA in management offered by the college had been useful and provided the employees who participated with relevant skills such as an ability to understand themselves better, learn to interact more effectively and understand how to work more effectively with others.

Sean
Sean was around 30 years of age and had graduated in Media Studies after leaving school. He was a Senior Editor, had been working with the company for a number of years but had been a freelance editor before that. He was passionate about his job as an editor describing it as *almost my dream job'*. The one aspect of his job he did not relish was being a manager for a team. He described himself as *'a reluctant manager'* and was only a manager because he was the longest serving member of the team. He also mentioned that the company had struggled to find a suitable course for him and that he had been reluctant to attend the soft skills course. In spite of his initial reluctance he had found it helpful, in particular the focus on self reflection. For him, the best part was the section on how people learn. It made him realise that he should rely less on verbal communication and instead include more written communication as this allowed people to access information in a range of formats:

> *What type of learner are you, what type of learners are the people you're working with, and I'd never thought about whether doing like a catch up meeting was the best way for learning. It's made me realise that actually may be we should write it down as well tell people about it … I'd never even thought about whether I was learning things the most efficient way (Sean, video event company)*

He felt that if the course had been more highly structured he would probably have got less from it. The fact that there were a range of people from very different backgrounds was a bonus and he thought that it would not have worked if it had only been people from his company as they knew each other too well. The only aspect of the course that he would have altered was the pacing. For him, it would have been feasible to do the course in a shorter space of time; however, he recognised that this might not be the view of everybody else.

Sonia
Sonia who was in her twenties had a degree in Media and Culture Studies. She had started her career in the company as 'a runner'. A runner was described by one of her colleagues as *'a general dogsbody'.* She had progressed to becoming a Production Assistant and then into her current post as a Production Coordinator over a period of three years. This was a typical pattern of career development within the company. It was a demanding job which entailed a lot of travel and at times she was under a lot of pressure due to tight deadlines.

Unlike Sean, she had asked for the opportunity to get some management training in her recent appraisal. Her initial expectations of the course were not high but she felt that she had learnt a lot about herself and other people:

> *I learned so much more about myself actually … about how to understand yourself and how other people work and I think … it's key to being a manager obviously because coming back in here it completely changed my mindset (Sonia, video event company)*

The course had helped her identify how she tackled tasks that she had to deal with at work which she described as follows:

> *I'm better at just getting thrown in the deep end, I work it out for myself … working out mistakes and then moving forward the next time (Sonia, video event company)*

Before attending the course she had assumed that this would work for other people within her organisation. However, some of the activities on the course made her realise that this not necessarily the case. She explained that what she had learnt had led her to change her approach to a colleague and this had helped him to work more effectively:

> *I gave him a lot of pressure, a lot of deadlines and I just saw him crumble, absolutely crumble and I felt terrible. I saw him sitting at his computer with blank face … I was just like 'you've got to do it … got to be thrown in the deep end ... then I started thinking about [the course tutor] and I was actually, no that's not what you have to do, you have to find out how it's going to work best for him, so I kind of took him aside … and I said well how is this going to work best for you? Do you need me to write this all down and actually prioritise it for you, would that help you to start? …it panned out really well and he did a good job (Sonia, video event company)*

She felt that the tutor offered the learners so much from his own experience and that the group discussions with the other learners were extremely useful and positive. The only changes that she would like to see was that the course could have been delivered at a faster pace and she would have liked the course to include a bit more about personality testing.

Case study 2

The company
The company specialised in roofing and had been set up as a sole trader business by Colin's (the learner) father about seven years ago when he was made redundant. The business had grown and now employed seventeen people. It was a family run business as Colin's mother and sister were both involved in running the business and his older brother also worked for the company. It had a well developed website which included details of training, policy, including equality and the company was part of the Investor in People scheme. Training was an important part of the business and the company took on at least one apprentice a year. In part this was a response to difficulty in finding suitably qualified staff. Colin's sister was the Business Development Manager and her role included managing all the training for the company. According to her, developing good communications within the company was of vital importance. The company had a team briefing for at least 10 minutes every Monday morning.

At that time they also did 'toolbox talks' to ensure that all staff were up to date with health and safety requirements. The company had weathered the recession well and this was attributed to good communications and the emphasis put on staff training. The company did annual staff evaluations and six monthly ones for trainees.

Colin
Colin was in his mid-thirties and had left school at the age of 15. He had started an apprenticeship with a blacksmith but did not compete his training as the firm went bust. He then did a number of what he called 'dead end' jobs before joining the army. He left the army after seven years due to lack of promotion. At that point he joined his father's company as a Developing Coordinator. This involved looking after all the jobs on different sites, ensuring that everything was going smoothly and that the relevant equipment and materials were on site. The company worked for larger building firms and were contracted to do the roofing part of a job. This meant that Colin had to work with the site agent for the main contractor for the whole building scheme. Since leaving school he had done an SVQ 2 in cladding and was currently doing an SVQ 3 in supervision as well as taking part in the short college course.

Colin had not been enthusiastic about doing the course. His father was going to attend but was not able to and Colin went in his place. He did not know what to expect from it and had not enjoyed the first two days but was determined to see it through. In spite of these misgivings he was able to identify areas of change in his way of dealing with people which he felt were as a result of the course:

> *I've tried dealing with different situations differently, like arguing and whatever, just say basically stop arguing and get on with your job ... whereas before I would just go into a paddy and say 'if you don't want a flaming job just piss off' ... so I've calmed down a wee bitty and tried to take it at a different angle if you like (Colin, Developing Coordinator, roofing company)*

He also attempted making changes to the way he delivered the health and safety training – the 'toolbox talks'. Rather than just going through it and telling it all from the book he was trying to demonstrate why it was important to take certain actions. However, he was not sure if this had had much impact on the other employees.

Although Colin had mixed feelings about the course he said he would recommend it to others, those at supervisory level and younger ones who were interested in learning.

Case study 3

The company
The company was a care home for the elderly situated on the outskirts of medium sized town. It was run by a trust and the house and grounds had been bequeathed to the trust by a wealthy individual. It offered long-term accommodation as well as respite care but it was not a nursing home and did not accept clients who required considerable nursing care although the manager was a qualified nurse. The home had more than 50 employees; this included care staff, kitchen staff and gardeners. It had 44 residents at that time of the interview. The company had a strong training culture and a manager who was proactive in identifying training opportunities beyond the statutory necessary training. The benefits from training were noted by the manager and she felt that the Trustees agreed with this:

> *I think we know that if we have a well trained staff, we've a well motivated staff and you retain your staff and that's why we invest in training (Care Home Manager)*

The manager was positive about the soft skills course and felt that it had helped Claire and her colleague who had also attended the course, to develop a number of strategies in terms of managing their work and other people.

Claire
Claire had left school after completing her Standard Grades and then gone to college, did an NC course and followed this up with an HND in Business Management. She took a temporary job in a care home to earn money and pay the mortgage on her flat. She stayed working in care and was given the opportunity to do an SVQ 3 in Social Care. She had recently been promoted to a Senior Carer and managed a team of around 12 people. Claire was very positive about the course and described it as being about yourself, your personality and then about how this impacted on your management skills. She felt the course had been very in-depth, the content was relevant to her work and she also appreciated meeting a range of people from different backgrounds and workplaces.

> *All the content was quite good, it was all very valid to your work role … a good group of different people … I thought it was really good … it was an open class, you could ask any question and a lot of it we talked about (Claire, Team Leader Care Home A)*

The course had impacted on how she worked with her team in a number of ways. She explained that the key benefits had been:

> *the way that you speak to people within your team as well, just little things, little changes and how you can get the most out of other people as well instead of just saying 'oh I'll do it' because it'll be quicker, I'll now say 'right I'll come and explain how you do this so next time I can just ask you to do it and I know that you know what you're doing', so there's good things that have come out of it (Claire, Team Leader Care Home A)*

As can be seen, the four people included in the case studies were generally positive about learning but they differed in their attitude to learning about managing people. Sonia and Claire were positive whilst Sean and Colin were more focused on learning technical skills relevant to their specific work tasks. However, in spite of their initial reluctance they were positive about the course and felt they had gained from it. All four were working in a setting that promoted and supported learning. This was in contrast to some of the other learners who, in spite of lack of support from their managers, felt that the course had given them a range of skills that they took back into the workplace. It is also worth noting that the course seemed to be of value irrespective of a learner's educational background. A number of the learners were qualified to degree level; however, others had left school with very limited formal qualifications and had mainly vocational or apprenticeship qualifications.

All the learners on the course apart from one were able identify ways in which they had changed some aspect of their practice at work as a result of attending the course. The only person who did not feel she had gained anything from the course had been in a management position for some time and had attended a range of courses which, according to her, covered the same topics. In terms of the five main topics included in the course, there is evidence from some, if not all, learners that these were developed. Sonia demonstrated that she understood both herself and her team members better, she showed the ability to manage change in work practices and to support and coach a team member in the achievement of a particular task. Sean and Colin felt that they were communicating more effectively with colleagues. Claire had found new ways of developing skills in members of her team.

Soft skills course – lower level

There were 8 learners on the March cohort of the course and all agreed to be interviewed. These interviews took place shortly after the course was completed. Six were interviewed twice about four months after taking part in the first interview. We also interviewed the line managers for all the learners. As these learners were all working for the same organisation an overview of the company and the experiences of three learners are presented in a single case study.

There were 13 learners on May cohort of the course and ten agreed to be interviewed, two of them reluctantly. Seven of the learners were interviewed twice about four months after taking part in the first interview. Two of those that had originally been interviewed declined to take part in a second interview and one person was going through a bereavement when we contacted her for the second interview and did not wish to be contacted again. We interviewed one line manager for one of the learners. The line manager for the three learners from the construction industry did not take part as it was, according to him, company policy not to do interviews; the line manager for the sports company declined due to lack of time and when contacted again that the company was in administration; the line manager for the learner in the arts organisation was due to leave the company and therefore declined; the line manager for two of the people in one of the voluntary organisations declined due to lack of time; one of the two learners in the second voluntary organisation was unable to find someone willing to talk to us and the second learner did not wish us to speak to her line manager. Table 4 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the learners, their place of employment and job title.

Table 4: Key characteristics of learners on lower level soft skills course

Name	Age band	Gender	Highest level of education	Employer	Current job title
Soft skills lower level course, March cohort					
Deirdre	35-44	Female	None	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Keith	32	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Mark	42	Male	Standard Grades	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Jim	55	Male	City & Guilds in Building and Glazing	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Neil	49	Male	SVQ 2 Social Care	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Sandy	35	Male	A levels	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Alison	45-54	Female	'O' levels	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Bob	31	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Soft skills lower level course, May cohort					
Aileen	25	Female	SVQ3 Social Care	Homeless charity	Support Officer
Debbie	35-44	Female	2 Highers/SVQ 2 Social care	Homeless charity	Support Officer
Tony	45-54	Male	Not known	Food charity franchise	Project Worker
Greig	45-54	Male	Degree Accountancy	Food charity franchise	Project Worker
Michelle	29	Female	Higher Secretarial	Arts Centre charity	HR and Operations Officer
Brian	49	Male	Apprenticeship	Construction	Foreman
Mike	40	Male	Apprenticeship	Construction	Senior Craftsman
Ricky	55-64	Male	Apprenticeship: Heating Engineer	Construction	Foreman

Veronica	25-34	Female	1 Higher - English	Sports	Commercial Assistant
Noel	34	Male	Degree Business Admin	Public Sector	Chargehand

March cohort: Case study 4

The company
The company was a Scottish charity set up about thirty years ago to provide care in the community. It now supported more than a 1000 people and employed just under 2000 staff across several sites in Scotland. It was an Investor in People organisation and an SQA approved centre. The company had a training department and was proactive in providing staff training.

Two of the managers had attended the course for managers and had felt that a similar course would be beneficial for some of their support workers who were due to start SVQ training. One advantage of this course was that it differed from the kind of courses that their staff normally attended in that it was generic and included a reflective element. Normally their courses focused on developing specific skills such as moving and handling or epilepsy training. These managers also thought that a course of this nature would be particularly useful for those employees who had limited formal qualifications. One of the line managers expressed this as follows:

> *I give them [the college] an A. I think courses like that actually give them a base to work from, some of them haven't been in education for a long time and it gets them back onto that learning curve because we're actually expecting them to do an SVQ coming in straight from say somebody that has worked in a factory for 20 odd years … I know that they all enjoyed themselves and that if we've got something [from the course] then [it is that they] they know how to get back into coping with learning again (Line Manager, Care in the Community)*

Deirdre
Deirdre was in her late thirties, married and had a teenage daughter. She left school at the earliest opportunity without qualifications and embarked on a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) for two years. On completion of this programme she worked as a waitress and in a shoe shop for 10 years. However, she wanted a change to a more worthwhile job and started working as a carer. Her husband worked for the same company.

Although Deirdre described herself as being more confident now than she was when younger, she was still hesitant about certain things. She had been reluctant to take part in the interview initially because she felt she would not have anything to contribute.

Deirdre was asked to do the course by her line manager and had been told it would help her prepare for the SVQ that she was required to do. She felt that the course content about body language had been useful and made her more aware of its impact; however, she struggled with the reflective element of the course. In particular, she found it difficult to stand back and reflect on tasks that she was used to doing on a regular basis.

> *What are we meant to be writing? So I was just like going through every unit and when I went home … writing on the reflective log how I felt and that but I said, some of the bits, 'what am I meant to be doing'? … I don't know what I was supposed to do on the bottom bit because it kind of repeats itself (Deirdre, Support Worker, Care in the Community)*

In spite of finding it difficult she did try to complete the assessment but had required considerable support from her line manager:

I was getting myself a wee bit worked up and at one point didn't know what I was doing … [my line manager] was really good, she was good at helping us think of ideas [and prompted us] 'well why don't you do that, this is what you should do', she has been really good (Deirdre, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

A further difficulty in relation to the assessment had been accessing the college's online learning environment – Blackboard. In the end Deirdre did not complete the assessment as the SVQ course had started earlier than anticipated. However, she did mention that learning to use reflective logs was helping her with the SVQ qualification that she was currently doing. Her line manager thought that, although Deirdre had been challenged by the soft skills course, she had gained and that showed in the way she did some of her work tasks:

I think at the moment Deirdre found it quite difficult, I think it was well out of her comfort zone. … I think she maybe doesn't have enough confidence in her abilities in this sort of area, and it's something she has not done a lot of, academic stuff, certainly been a long time … think it's certainly made Deirdre appreciate the importance of paperwork and things in the service because of the task management and stuff like that … I think I have seen her doing more paperwork, I mean she is getting stuck into doing the reviews, and she is a bit more keen to be doing it than she was before which is good, which is really good. (Line manager, Care in the Community)

Alison

Alison was in her fifties and had left school with one 'O' level. She then worked in a shop and a range of other similar jobs; however, she had always wanted to work in care and had started in her current job about two years ago. She was a full-time care worker which she enjoyed. She had undertaken all mandatory training at work and had started her SVQ 3 in Care at the time of the second interview. She had, like Deirdre, been asked by her line manager to do the soft skills course. She was, like many of the other learners, dubious about the course after the first day:

Well, at first I thought to myself, 'is this really for us, are we benefiting from that?' but now that it's finished, it's about time management and tasks and how you can do things in a timescale and a certain way … managing your job basically, isn't it (Alison, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

She also mentioned, that in spite of the course being challenging she had enjoyed it:

Think it was the whole course [that was challenging] because it's been a long time since I was at school, like learning all over again. I enjoyed it! (Alison, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

However, like Deirdre, she had found the reflective tasks difficult to do:

This reflective stuff, I find it hard, I don't speak about myself, I don't write about myself, so kind of find it hard to write down stuff about me, I could yak, yak and do the practical stuff, but see if you tell me to write it down I'll struggle, don't know why. A talker and a do-er but not a writer (Alison, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

Alison was not able to pinpoint any specific benefits which had affected her work practice; however, it was clear that the course was getting her back into learning. At the time of the second interview she had started the SVQ 3 and she mentioned that the reflective element of the soft skills course that she had struggled with had helped her:

Because when it comes to reflective accounts [for the SVQ], it's 'oh, I've done that at the college', we kind of had an idea of how to do that, same problem again as what happened at the college is starting it off, to start your sentence (Alison, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

Jim

Jim, aged 55, had been brought up by his grandmother and left school with a school leaving certificate at the age of 15. He went into the building trade and completed a City and Guilds in Building and Glazing which involved going to college in Glasgow as part of his apprenticeship. Although he could have got further qualifications in that area, his employer was not prepared to fund it and he could not afford to do so. He left the building trade and went into engineering to get better pay and worked in that trade for 30 years until he was made redundant in 2008. When he was made redundant he signed up for a Health Academy course. This is a pre-employment training course and it guarantees you an interview for a job. Jim explained this as follows:

I went on a course, it was the Health Care Academy … you got an interview so managed to get on that … it's in the health care NHS …, it's only a 6 week course, they guarantee you an interview for any job that comes up, you have a sticker that you put on the job application (Jim, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

This course did not lead to employment and he was unemployed for 8 months before securing a part-time job with his current employer. Jim's line manager suggested to him that he did the soft skills course and he was keen to do it. He felt that the course had been beneficial, in particular in identifying some of his strengths and weaknesses. The time management and communication skills had been of benefit to him but he would have like the course to been more geared towards people working in care and less generic. He had been keen to do the assessment but had, like Deirdre, struggled with Blackboard. In addition to benefits for work this course and the one he did for the Healthcare Academy had given him the confidence to speak to people and to take part in our interview:

Going on those two or three days, what [the tutor] took us through, communication and talking … I wouldn't be able to speak to you now if it wasn't for things like that. What we have done with [the tutor] and what I'd done on the Healthcare Academy course which was run through the college also [gave me confidence] (Jim, Support Worker, Care in the Community)

This cohort of learners came from the same company and had been encouraged by their line managers to do the course as a preparation for starting an SVQ 3 in care. Most of the learners identified some benefits from the course except Bob and Keith who had tertiary level education. They felt they had not gained much. However, they were not committed to their job and the company as they intended to find other work. Bob described the job as *'it's paying the bills'* and he had not signed up to do the SVQ. Around half of the learners, especially those who had left school early and had few formal qualifications had found the reflective element of the course challenging and would have liked more time to deal with it. However, this aspect of the course had proved valuable for those who had subsequently started on their SVQ training. According to the line managers of the learners, the course had achieved their aims as it had proved to be a good preparation for the SVQ.

May cohort: Case study 5

The company

The company was a charitable organisation established about 30 years ago. Initially it was set up to provide emergency accommodation for rough sleepers. The company employed 16 people. We were not able to speak to a line manager in this company. Debbie did not want

us to speak to her line manager and Aileen's line manager declined citing lack of time. In the interviews with Debbie and Aileen they mentioned that staff were given opportunities to do training but this was mainly focused on that which was required by legislation.

Aileen
Aileen, aged 25, had worked for the organisation since leaving school with Standard Grade qualifications. Since starting to work with the company she had gained a SVQ 3 in Social Care. In her view, the company offered many opportunities for training. She started as a care officer and had been promoted to support officer. The post was full-time and involved shift work.

Aileen was told about the course by her line manager. Initially she was hesitant about attending the course but had then, with another colleague, volunteered to attend. Like many others, she was not convinced the course was relevant for her when she first started it:

> *I would say it was more about team-building and working as a team, and confidence. I liked it … the first week I thought I wasn't going to be going back the second week, because I thought 'it's not for me' but it was (Aileen, Support Worker, Third Sector)*

At the end, she felt that it had provided her with strategies that helped her to manage her work more effectively and that the communication skills exercises had benefited not just her but her colleagues as team meetings had become more effective:

> *Well, we don't talk over each other now, every time if we have a meeting me and [colleague] look at each other and start laughing because of the course … sometimes we'll make a comment to remind [them] because we told them all about the course and we all say to them remember the talking over each other kind of thing, but we have a laugh about it but then people realise (Aileen, Support Worker, Third Sector)*

Debbie
Debbie, who was in her late thirties, had left school after fifth year with two Highers. She then went to college and completed a course in social care. After completing her college course, she had a range of jobs unrelated to social care before starting her current, part-time job. She had done a number of mandatory training courses through work but, unlike Aileen, she did not feel that the organisation was particularly good at offering training. It was not clear if she was offered fewer opportunities because she worked part-time or if she was unable to take up offers of training due to her domestic life.

She was asked by her manager to do soft skills course. Initially she was doubtful as she thought it was about computers, which she did not like. She had mistaken soft skills for software! She felt that the course had offered her a great deal:

> *I think it was all about learning development and a lot of stuff on the reflective log … I thought 'oh no' but it's proved to be very useful, I've really enjoyed the course … doing the role play learning, the listening, I noticed I'm not the greatest of listeners. It was really reflecting on how you are and how you are in the workplace and I found it really useful. (Debbie, Support Worker, Third Sector)*

Debbie had also appreciated the opportunity to stand back from her work and reflect on how she tackled it. In a busy workplace, it is not always possible to create space for such reflection. The course had also helped her in becoming better with her time management and to become more assertive in terms of the amount of work she could manage. She worked part-time, 4 days per week, but had the same caseload as staff who worked full-time. After the course she had negotiated with her line manager to ensure that at least one of her cases was low need:

My caseload would be the four key clients for working a four day week, however, for people that work a five day week have also got four key clients … what I got from the course was I don't have to do it … being stressed out, just say 'well I have got four high risk cases, I either need one taken away or swap one over, I need a low needs one' (Debbie, Support Worker, Third Sector, Dundee PDA operational level)

May cohort: Case study 6

The company
The company provided a range of building services such as plumbing, heating and electrical installations and worked mainly on public buildings such as hospitals and schools. The line manager of these learners declined to be interviewed stating that it was not company policy and that he did not know anything about the course.

According to the three employees that we interviewed, the company did all the mandatory training and ensured it was kept up to date. However, opportunities for training seemed to be entirely driven by legislative demands and limited to certain members of staff. There were no procedures for staff appraisal. The recession had impacted on the company and they had laid off around 30 members of staff. The impact was explained by Ricky as *Well we've not got big jobs in at the moment because everything's dried up.* The overall impression from the three interviews was that the company relied heavily on verbal instructions and relatively few instructions were written down. Unlike the roofing construction company there were no regular team meetings for staff. There also seemed to be limited use of computers and paperwork that needed to be done by these employees was handwritten. There was a company website but this contained only a front page and had not moved beyond 'being under construction' over the time-span of our project.

Ricky
Ricky was in his late fifties and had left school at the earliest opportunity with no qualifications. He was helped by a neighbour to write an application for an apprenticeship to become a heating engineer. He had worked in the company for 30 years and was now a foreman. His son and some of his other relatives also worked for the company. He had been on mandatory training courses through his work and mentioned that he found the gas fitting course challenging because it involved maths.

His boss had arranged for him to attend the soft skills course with another five colleagues. Like several of the other learners, he was dubious about the course after the first day's attendance. One of his colleagues mentioned that Ricky and several of his work colleagues had disrupted the class considerably on the first day. According to this other colleague, it was only due to the skills of the tutor that the course had continued and the full programme had been delivered. In spite of his early misgivings, Ricky was able to identify benefits of the course. A key one was that it had helped him to learn to listen to the views of others:

I've quietened down a bitty … because when you are sitting reading some of that and then you do the roles, your wee tour of people, you're explaining and listening to them [and] going 'right enough, they're probably right and I've probably been wrong' … it has helped us (Ricky, Foreman, Construction)

It had also changed his communication habits as he now annotated drawings to provide written information for his supervisees. In the past, he had simply told people what to do:

I write down on the drawings the way they [e.g. architect, consultant] want it done and things like that whereas before I would just keep it in my head, had to tell people what to do and then the next 'right what [are] you wanting me to do now', whereas I am

writing it down so they can see what I'm on about so they could it themselves (Ricky, Foreman, Construction)

At the end of the course he felt it was suitable for a range of people, irrespective of their field of work but that the pace could have been slower:

I think he [tutor] was just trying to cram too much into each session, that's the only thing, everything else he was explaining was right, it was just somebody like me to take all this in and just too much … see Veronica and the other two girls there were taking it in their strides (Ricky, Foreman, Construction)

Brian

Brian was in his late forties and had left school with four 'O' grades in English, arithmetic, woodwork and geography. His father had advised him that it was essential to get some qualifications in order to get an apprenticeship. He completed his apprenticeship as a heating engineer and had worked in this trade ever since and was now a foreman in the company.

Brian was ambivalent about the course, he had like the others in his company, been told to go on the course by the manager. He had been concerned and embarrassed about the behaviour of some of his work colleagues and, after the first day, he felt the course was inappropriate for him and his colleagues:

The first day of the course, we couldn't see how it was going to help us in the workplace … [we don't] generally have team meetings, we don't have discussion about the job, we get a drawing and that's what we've got to produce … but second week, third week, I got a lot out of it (Brian, Foreman, Construction)

He was able to pinpoint the areas that had been of use to him that had been included later on in the course:

I've picked up a few wee bits … task management, break it down into smaller parts so you don't overload them [the people he was responsible for] with information … and time management … and again, when something goes wrong … some of the guys do get aggressive so I've picked up that as well, how to deal with [that, because I used to get aggressive and go aggressive back (Brian, Foreman, Construction)

However, he found the reflective aspect of the course hard:

What I really didn't like and I still struggle with … where you've got the reflective learning, why you started, what you've learnt and then you had to write down what you had learnt, what I am saying is some of the stuff I already know, I've already done, I would have done the task management as expanded on a wee bit, so I still can't get my head round this reflective … it's like you're asking me to evaluate myself and I find that hard (Brian, Foreman, Construction)

In the second interview he was slightly less enthusiastic when he summarised his gains from the course as: *wee snippets that could help us but nothing much.*

Mike

Mike, aged 40, had school left with three Standard Grades mentioned that he was not a *pen-pusher.* His father, who was a foreman, had been his role model. Mike did an apprenticeship in electrical engineering after leaving school and had got his apprenticeship through his father's contacts. He had worked in a range of jobs in the trade both in his home city and further afield. The travelling and living in temporary accommodation had led to a poor lifestyle and he therefore applied for a job with his current company where he was now a senior

craftsman. He had no interest in undertaking further formal qualifications (e.g. HND) but would have liked to have been supported by the company in doing his gas certificate. However, this course was expensive and the company was not willing to sponsor him. Although he considered the company similar to many that he had worked in, he also referred to it as being old-fashioned in the way it worked.

Mike was told to go on the course by his manager through a text message and was unclear as to why he had been chosen:

> *Got a text message, Mike, you'll be going to [the college], 9 o'clock, Thursday morning for four weeks, that was it. Go there, do it … I don't know how he choose me (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

There had been no information about the course from his manager and on the first day he felt that the course was totally irrelevant to his work:

> *Well, we never knew exactly what we were going to be doing … I don't believe the course did any good to me because I didn't know exactly what was coming. If somebody had come in and maybe said 'right this is what's happening, this is what you're going to be doing', yeah, that's fine, but we didn't know what we were going into. But don't' get us wrong, [the tutor] did a great job, you could see what he was coming from, even like the second week because you were actually starting to see what he was getting at (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

He felt that the course had been of some benefit because

> *It was alright, a wee bit of benefit, it made you understand how to do things different, and how you do your day to day running of some stuff. Time will tell, obviously once we do a portfolio … got to do a project (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

The main reason for his scepticism seemed to relate to the way the company operated. He felt that there were no opportunities for applying what they had learnt during the course in the workplace:

> *I could see what it was coming from [the course] but as I say … being realistic we wouldn't be able to do it within work. Maybe be able to do that in an office or something, on site you wouldn't be able to do that. You could try, don't get me wrong … but most of the guys we've got are scatterbrains (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

Mike explained this further and mentioned that communications within the company were mainly through spoken instructions and paperwork that was written by hand rather than on a computer:

> *Nine times out of ten, if your line manager tells you to do something, you just do it because it's on his head, if anything goes wrong, so if he phones us and says you're going do that, you just do it (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

In spite of being negative of the value of the course, Mike felt that the tutor had done a very good job and that the teaching had been well done and interesting:

> *I think he [tutor] did actually really good to be honest. I think he broke it down as little as possible and it was interesting …a lot of people were laughing at it but being realistic if you actually sit back and you see what he's getting at, you actually pay attention, he [tutor] is actually doing well (Mike, Senior Craftsman, Construction)*

Mike was aware that he needed to do the assessment to get his qualification and intended to do the assessment. He felt it might be useful and described as *'another notch on the bedpost'.* However, in the end he did not complete the assessment as his marriage had broken down and he was struggling to sort out his home life. He also felt that having to do the assessment in writing was a hindrance as he struggled with writing.

The learners from this soft skills course spoke of having gained something from the course and most felt that this learning would impact on their work. However, the learners from the construction company were more ambivalent. Whilst they could identify some benefits it seemed that practices at work were unlikely to support them in make full use of their new learning. We only spoke to three of the six learners from this company. The three who declined to be interviewed are likely to have felt the course was not appropriate from them. This was suggested by their behaviour and their comments on the day that we observed the course. The reflective element challenged a number of them and like the March cohort of learners it was the learners with few or no formal qualifications who struggled most with this element.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Case study 7

We interviewed two union officials, the training manager for the bus company, two union learning representatives (ULRs), two tutors and eleven drivers/learners who were currently doing a formal ESOL course or had done one recently. Of the eleven drivers that we interviewed, two were women and nine men. Seven were aged between 25 and 34 including the two women; two were between 35-44 age; and two between 55 and 64. All were natives of Poland and Polish was their first language. They 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 not completed the course. Most of the learners stated that the main reason for moving to the UK was to get a better paid job and better working conditions. Table 5 provides an overview of the learners.

Table 5: Key characteristics of learners on the ESOL course

Name	Age band	Gender	Highest level of education	Employer	Current job title
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)					
Roger	25-34	Male	Electrician (Poland)	Bus company	Bus driver
Paul	25-34	Male	Upper secondary (started university)	Bus company	Bus driver
Kate	25-34	Female	Upper secondary (started university	Bus company	Bus driver
Rupert	35	Male	Electrician	Bus company	Bus driver
Alice	25-34	Female	Technical school	Bus company	Bus driver
Jack	25-34	Male	Upper secondary (started university)	Bus company	Bus driver
Robert	25-34	Male	Vocational school	Bus company	Bus driver
Martin	25-34	Male	Upper secondary (started university	Bus company	Bus driver
Derek	35	Male	Joiner	Bus company	Bus driver
Jeorge	55-64	Male	Paramedic	Bus company	Bus driver
Ziggy	57	Male	Vocational training	Bus company	Bus driver

The company and the partnership with the union
The union had entered into a learning partnership with the company. This had been set up by the full-time union officials who negotiated with the company on behalf of the union learning representatives:

> *the main Union Convener … negotiated for us to get the paid release, the learning reps thing, and get the facility and he talked the company round to supplying us with all the computers, getting them on the Internet and this was really the only sort of office we had available. (Drew, ULR, Eastfield)*

According to the training manager, the company initially paid for ESOL courses to be delivered by staff from the local colleges but the union had then taken over sourcing funding for the courses. The training manager was of the view that it had benefited the company as it helped to retain staff; however, he also stressed that the company had a moral obligation to look after its workforce:

> *I suppose you are hoping that at the very end of it you are going to have an employee that you retain, and is happy to come to work but it can also be used to attract employees. We would be lying if we were saying there weren't financial gains to be made in that sense, assisting a lower staff turnover, also helps to bring people into the company. I think there is a moral obligation there as well, on the company and that's recognised by the company that you know we need to look after employees and we've had people for a long, long time, who do a good job. (Bus company training manager)*

One of the union officials described the bus company as one of the best companies when it came to supporting learning in the workplace. However, as shown by the quote above, relationship was two-way. The company provided space, time for the ULRs and computers; in return some of the general, mandatory training could be done in the learning centre. One such example was that the new ticketing machine had been placed in the learning centre so that drivers could practise using it. One of the ULRs had also developed a CD with a visual overview of the different bus routes in the city which helped the drivers when learning their routes. This ULR was also an SVQ assessor and could assess some of the mandatory training in the workplace.

Formal ESOL learning
There was a strong emphasis on being as flexible as possible and that was the reason for offering ESOL in the learning centres. Classes were fitted in with shift patterns as far as possible. Learners who wanted to go beyond the provision in the learning centres were helped with accessing courses at one of the local colleges.

> *It's a lot to do with the job … bus driving … one week you can be up at four in the morning, next week start at four in the afternoon, and they could be spread out over starting at seven and finishing at seven, so you've got to kind of fit it in … you have to look at the needs of the learner … (Stuart, ULR, Lakeside)*

This had led to offering the courses on two days per week at each of the two learning centres with the tutor staying in the learning centre the whole day

> *So we brought Graeme [tutor] from the depot and he is here all day, he has got times for his classes but we don't really work to the times … because what I will do is if a driver comes up here and he has got 40 or 50 minutes they will slot him in … so Graeme is here on a Monday and a Wednesday … (Stuart, ULR, Lakeside)*

Graeme explained that being located in the learning centre had increased his contact with the learners and that it was possible for them to get work even if they did not have time to attend the classes:

> *... some times they're given a spreadover shift which takes them right from the morning right through to the evening, and it's impossible for them to come to the class, so what they might do is they might pop in before their shift and say what are we going to be doing today, can you give me the work for it, the handouts for it, and I'll do that and if they have any questions I can ask them at the next class that I come to, that's good as well, because before when I didn't see students they were off the radar, just didn't know where they were, why they weren't coming, did they not like the class … (Graeme, ESOL tutor 1)*

The availability of the tutor was noticed and valued by the learners:

> *Because of our work, we work shifts, the tutor stayed here for a whole day because lessons were from 10 until 12 and then from 5 until 7 so he stayed here all day long so we came here and ask or speak to him whatever, any time. … Yeah he was available all the time, so basically when I come to English classes, two hours lessons, but I can ask him any time, still keep his mobile phone so if I have any difficulty I can phone him and ask for help. (Rupert, Bus Driver, Lakeside)*

There was a strong emphasis on learner centred teaching and Graeme also felt that it was important to make the learning experience enjoyable. He stressed the need to respect adult learners and he also felt that ESOL learning should be broad and include an introduction to Scottish culture and an appreciation of the country. Some of the learners we spoke to appreciated this; however it may also have led to less emphasis on the formal, assessed part of the course and this seems to have caused some tensions with some of the learners. Graeme found it difficult to ensure that his learners undertook the assessments and he felt that the level of attendance was not always sufficient to ensure that the learners gained sufficient knowledge to sit the assessment:

> *we did before have it as an SQA course but we found because attendance and various other things, I couldn't put these students forward … if they had been off for may be 4 weeks, lost so much work, I thought I'm not happy about putting you into do an SQA assessment because I think it's futile, a waste of everyone's time, a waste of your time, waste of my time marking it and also it's then counted as a fail rate … what we could do is for any students who were interested doing it we can actually put them towards working towards doing an SQA module so it might be something like, we could choose a module together for them, so it could be the everyday communications, say right this is what we're going to do with you, this is what you have to achieve by the end of it, and start working towards that using the SQA materials (Graeme, ESOL tutor 1)*

He argued that the learners did not want to do the exams:

> *The other thing is many of them don't want to do exams … many of them were asked in the recent research that was done what the most important thing they hoped to gain from it, and very few of them actually said 'I want to get a qualification at the end of it', which was interesting, because you'd think that many people would. (Graeme, ESOL tutor 1)*

However, this was not the view of all the learners. Paul had attended because he wanted to gain the qualification:

Obviously I was interested to get the certificate, some classes I've attended because I only wanted to pass the exam and get [the] certificate, some times were too easy even for me and some times I had to come four or five hours before I had to start to work…. Sadly Graeme said no exam because there are not enough people so I just gave up this one. Can't say I'm happy. This one would be like, I'm the most disappointed on this one the English with Graeme, for me it was like just OK come for a lesson, spend time, and suddenly sorry no exam, no certificate. (Paul, Bus Driver, Lakeside)

After Graeme's contract was terminated the union learning representative entered into a new arrangement with a local organisation. This organisation taught ESOL and arranged assessments in ESOL for work level 4 and 5 at the time of the interviews taking place. The ESOL tutor had been replaced and Dave, the new tutor, was working on assessments with those wishing to gain the certificate. Paul was one of the drivers who took the opportunity to do the assessment:

I'm going to do the ESOL for work level 5. This one is a bit more difficult and will be a bit challenging at some points so I'd like to do this one and hopefully this certificate will be more recognisable, more known. (Paul, Bus Driver, Lakeside)

However, in spite of the problems in relation to assessment, the learners were generally appreciative of the course and some valued learning the grammar. Others felt that it was helpful that the tutor was a fluent Polish speaker:

Graeme speaks Polish very well so if you some times we not understand the grammar English, he talk in Polish to class and explain what we had to do so we understand English grammar. Very helpful for us. (Robert, Bus Driver, Eastfield)

ESOL learning – the informal aspect

The need for learning and improving their English was emphasised by Paul, one of the ESOL learners who graphically described his confusion when he first arrived in the country.

the language barrier was the worst … every day you heard English, the English hits you from everywhere, TV, radio, people around you, on the bus, I was attending the training here so driving the bus, seeing the names, the books, the letters, everything was in English, it was like every day more of that English, more than I could learn ….first week passed and I was exhausted, absolutely, I decided I hate English, I hate all the British, Scottish, too much, was like someone tells you OK learn the Chinese alphabet and then gives you the book like this, 12,000 letters and you've got one week (Paul, Bus Driver, Lakeside)

At this point, his main concern was to get some help with understanding the language and he was not concerned about qualifications:

… so then I decided to find some help and at that time it was after a year … I saw there was a bus, the learning centre wasn't like the office, it was just one of the oldest buses the company could find, they covered the windows, they put Stuart on the bus, two computers, power supply, and he was sitting on the bus waiting for people who want to learn something, looked awful, sitting in the shed here outside the garage here, so strange, but it was someone who wanted to help and it was occasion to speak [Scottish] in English, mix them, and ask questions, a lot of questions, that's the beginning how I started at the learning centre. (Paul, Bus Driver, Lakeside)

Paul, as can be seen above, went on to complete the formal classes and he eventually went on to study for a Higher in English and Mathematics at a local college. Although Paul moved on to gain qualifications, others simply wanted to practise speaking the language and

therefore valued the informal learning opportunities provided by having the tutor in the learning centre:

> *Me, so I just went to him to speak. I just like speak a lot and I think I annoy him in the lesson because it was all the time asking or make some funny comments, and he couldn't teach a lot, so that why I come to him and we just spoke, and that is better way for me to learn. (Kara, Bus Driver, Lakeside)*

It seemed that the importance of the informal contacts grew as the learning centre became more established and also that the formal English provided in the ESOL classes was not necessarily sufficient for bus drivers needing to engage with the local population. Stuart, the ULR, therefore started teaching the local dialect to the drivers who came into the centre. The impact of this was evident when we were talking to some of drivers and we could also hear it in the informal banter that was going on when we visited the learning centre. This additional provision had clearly been important to Paul, one of the drivers, as it had gradually dawned on him that it was not English but Scottish that was the problem for him:

> *I like challenges, and if you've got the challenge you've got try to do something, so I came here and I think I'll do this, I'll learn this English, and one week and I decided no it's not working like this, totally grounded. But the months passed, I started to work, I realised it's not English what I needed but Scottish, every day was more and more, I've learned more, I've read more, tried to write more in English but I came here to the garage, people spoke and I said it's not English it's Scottish … Before I could just hear it but I couldn't find the words in it, suddenly when Stuart started to speak … but much slower, I saw this one sound divided in the words and I could translate them or invert that sound like the word town they always say 'toon' so I started to compare the words and say this word means this one, and just now I can understand something. (Paul, Bus Driver, Lakeside)*

In addition to providing learning opportunities to the employees, the centre had also opened up to family members and some of the drivers had brought their wives along to learn English. Simon, the training manager explained that the company were keen to build the link with external organisations and that the company allowed family members to attend the learning centre:

> *I think a lot of it focuses now … to try and build on the successes and about involving external organisations and all the partnerships, not just for quality but I think the communities and the families of the employees things like that and I think that's what we are seeing more and more now is that the families are starting to come and use the centre. … Initially I don't think we intended [families attending] … we maybe didn't intend that to happen but it has happened, and we certainly wouldn't discourage it, you know, if it helps the actual employee, having their family coming in, then it can only be a good thing and benefit us as well. (Simon, bus company training manager)*

The value of having access to formal ESOL classes as well the opportunities to develop English informally was summed up by one of the learners:

> *I didn't know the rules, I understood a lot but I didn't know the rules how to use the exact word or when the exact tense so I didn't know that, Graeme [tutor] explained that very well so I think the most of the rules I got from Graeme, but [the] common language is a language that people speak [came from Stuart, the ULR] and Graeme he taught us the rules like in school but both very handy, but two different ways to learn English and [the local dialect] as well. (Rupert, driver, Lakeside)*

This final case study demonstrates that the union had developed a successful relationship with the company which seemed to benefit employers as well as employees. The learners had gained valuable language skills through the workplace and those that wanted to progress were helped in accessing further learning. The key challenges were to ensure that that access to learning was sufficiently flexible to allow shift workers to attend classes, that this flexibility did not compromise the opportunity to gain an accredited qualification and to ensure that funding was available to maintain provision at the current level.

All of these case studies demonstrate the positive benefits of courses that are adapted for the workplace. Most of the learners were able to identify relevant and new learning and several managers spoke of the benefits of the course to their employee(s). The learners on the soft skills course were supported by their employees through time off work. However, beyond this support it was clear that the extent to which employees were supported within the companies in relation to training varied. The companies in case studies 1 and 2 had strong training cultures but differed considerably in the focus of their business and type of employees. The learners in case study 1 were self motivated and had high levels of formal education. They received a great deal of support and encouragement from the company to engage in further training and learning. In case study 2, the roofing company, the learner was less motivated but the strong training culture and support within the company encouraged transfer of learning from the course into workplace practices. This is in contrast with case study 6 where the culture of the company seemed unlikely to support the development of new work practices. The first two companies had weathered the recession well; in case study 1 there had been two redundancies early on but business had improved and the company had recruited more staff. In the roofing company there had been no redundancies; however, in case study 6, the construction company there had been several redundancies and there were more in the pipeline at the time of the final interview. 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 to deal with the turbulence of the economic climate.

The level of support within a business also seemed to be particularly important for learners with no or low previous qualifications. This was particularly evident in the case of Deirdre in case study 4. She lacked confidence in herself and was concerned about coping with the reflective element of the course. Her line manager offered ongoing support and encouragement and at the time of the final interview she had started to do a SVQ 3 in care.

Section 5: Summary and Conclusion

Lifelong learning policies are increasingly promoting the workplace as a place for learning as well as a place for working. The Skills Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007b) emphasised the need for employers to engage with learning and to provide opportunities for employees to learn. It also encouraged unions to work in partnership with employers to deliver learning. Scotland's colleges have long been recognised as key to lifelong learning and have been urged to develop courses which emphasise employability. The initiatives reported on here clearly contribute towards the realisation of the aims of the Skills strategy and the ESOL strategy. The soft skills courses contributed towards developing skills identified by employers as lacking in employees (Scottish Government, 2010c). The learners who participated in the soft skills courses were able to identify and explain how they were able to take learning from the course and apply it in the workplace. These two courses employed an approach to learning which demanded that the learners engaged and thought through a range of situations and options for action. The courses aimed to get the learners to reflect on their own workplace practices and also, on the manager's course, on those of others. The evidence gathered suggested that it had the intended impact on the majority of the learners although what each took from the course differed according to their background and setting. However, it is also clear that the reflective element was very challenging for those who had few or no formal qualifications. The pace of the course left some of them confused at times, a point which will be returned to below.

It was evident that union learning representatives can play an important role in supporting learners in the workplace and in brokering opportunities for learning. The ESOL learners in this particular workplace had gained considerably from the opportunities offered, both formal and informal. The union learning representative at Larkfield was proactive and extremely supportive of the learners. He also worked at reducing the barriers to learning by seeking to time the formal classes to fit in with shift working. At times he also negotiated changes in shifts for some of the learners, especially those who were attending college classes.

The key challenges to developing and delivering workplace learning that emerge from these findings arguably are:

- engaging with and developing programmes for those with no or few formal qualifications
- ensuring continuity and sustainability in course delivery, especially during a recession
- encouraging learners to engage with assessments required for accreditation of learning

Whilst some employers were positive and proactive in supporting their employees in learning and training, developing workplace cultures in all businesses where learning is central to the business ethos is likely to remain a challenge. It is also clear that there are considerable challenges in engaging with employees who have low levels of skills and formal qualifications. The initiatives reported on here were making an important contribution and demonstrate the benefits of providing for employees with low or no formal qualifications. However, this group is likely to require sustained support and at a time of limited funding this is likely to be problematic. The chief executive of Skills Development Scotland, Damien Yeates, stated at a recent conference that an individual with a degree level qualification had received an annual subsidy of around £11,000 to £19,000 whilst completing that degree. He further argued that funding for workplace learning would provide opportunities to learn for those who had not had any funding for tertiary education (TESS, 30.09.2011). It could be argued that offering opportunities to learn to those in work with low formal qualifications would enhance their ability to retain their job as well as contributing towards a more socially just society. Our research showed that this group of employees stand to gain but that they need more support both in the workplace and from educational institutions. This requires funding that is long-term and the development of courses that can respond to the needs of this group of learners.

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