

Career Learning for Adults

Summary Report of the National Stakeholder Policy Roundtable

6th November 2018

1. Background

1.1 The event provided an opportunity for adult education policymakers, providers and other stakeholders to bring their collective knowledge and expertise to bear on **the question of how the wider adult education sector can most effectively support career learning for adults**. It was convened by Learning & Work Institute for the Department for Education (DfE).

1.2 **The context for the event was the proposed development of the new National Retraining Scheme, and it followed closely on the announcement of £100 million funding for the first phase of the initiative.** Faced with a rapidly changing labour market, spreading automation and the UK's persistently low productivity, weak social mobility and over-reliance on poorly paid, insecure, low-skill jobs, a range of policy responses are being developed which aim to help adults to up-skill and re-skill throughout their working lives. The Industrial Strategy and the Careers Strategy outline policies to engage more adults in learning, with a key focus on equipping those in low skilled, low wage or obsolete jobs to retrain or progress at work. DfE is investing £40m in 'career learning pilots', which are testing approaches to increasing demand among adults for skills training and learning that is of value to local economies. Learning from the pilots will inform implementation of the National Retraining Scheme, and the evidence and insights generated through the roundtable are also intended to feed into that process.

1.3 For many participants, the starting point for their contributions was an understanding that **adults who have the lowest levels of skills and are therefore among the most vulnerable in the labour market are also least likely to take part in learning of any kind and have fewest opportunities to do so in the workplace.** Engaging these adults in learning is essential for achieving a more productive economy and fairer society, and it requires interventions which consistently tackle the range of barriers which currently inhibit their participation. This note summarises the issues and ideas raised through the plenary session, workshops and follow-up survey so that they can inform stakeholders' on-going engagement with the evolving career learning agenda.

2. What are the issues?

2.1 **There is not an established culture of lifelong learning in England, but this will be vital for promoting up-skilling and re-skilling as inherent features of working lives in the future.** Given the overlapping challenges of rapid technological change, the inability to predict with certainty which occupations will appear and disappear and longer working lives, it is clear that for many people career learning will not be a one-off activity. Rather, having the willingness and ability to engage and re-engage will be key.

2.2 Alongside this, **to build a sustainable career learning system, a commitment to co-investment from individuals and employers alongside government will need to be secured.** Central to creating a national culture of learning will be shifting the perception

among individuals and employers that it is “worth it”. This means raising awareness about the value and benefits of learning and demonstrating its relevance in diverse contexts and circumstances.

2.3 The wider economic context for re-skilling and up-skilling exerts a powerful influence on the opportunities available to individuals within the changing labour market and underpins perceptions of the value of training. Structural weaknesses in the UK labour market mean that there are currently too few jobs for people to move into which offer good opportunities for career progression. The question is therefore not simply how to encourage individuals to gain new skills and become more adaptable, but also what government and industry need to do to create a thriving economy that offers genuine routes to new, better paid and sustainable jobs and motivates individuals and employers to invest in learning.

2.4 It can be very difficult for adults in work to prioritise devoting time, energy, money and other resources to learning. This is likely to be particularly true for those in low paid, low skilled work, who may be balancing multiple jobs and managing insecure and / or unpredictable work on zero-hours contracts or in the “gig economy”. Career learning cannot be adequately addressed in isolation from the myriad wider concerns that adults have to reconcile in their daily lives, as significant barriers may need to be overcome before undertaking learning becomes a feasible option.

2.5 Fragmentation, not only within the current employment and skills system, but also between employment and skills services and other services, too often hampers an effective, joined-up approach. Policy and funding splits between schools, HE and adult skills; differentiation of work-related support for adults by working status; and siloed working by agencies and organisations delivering public services at national and local levels, risk impeding the design and delivery of coherent, accessible and integrated approaches that will be necessary to engage adults in learning.

2.6 While the picture is variable, evidence strongly suggests that much more needs to be done to persuade employers of their responsibility to support the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce and the benefits of doing so. There is an entrenched, prevailing culture in some sectors and organisations against training staff for fear that they will leave. However, evidence on the quality of jobs indicates that employers who invest in skills development outperform comparable low wage, low skill organisations.

2.7 Work, learning and health / mental health intersect in a range of ways which affect the ability and willingness of individuals to engage in career learning. For instance:

- The quality of work impacts on health and mental health, which in turn impacts upon an individual’s ability to stay in employment and to progress and flourish at work. Adults in poor quality jobs which are detrimental to their health / mental health may struggle for a range of reasons to access suitable learning opportunities which would help them to break out of this corrosive cycle.
- Poor mental or physical health that puts adults at risk of losing their jobs may in some cases be directly attributable to factors in their working environment, such as job insecurity, lack of adequate training for the role and poorly managed change.
- Disability and health related barriers to progression in work are not being addressed from the employer perspective. The challenge is not just how to enable adults with disabilities and health conditions to gain skills for work, but also how to work with employers to design good job roles that are accessible to them.

2.8 Digital exclusion remains a significant obstacle for some adults to accessing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling. Blended and on-line models for the delivery of both learning and information, advice and guidance (IAG) for learning and work are becoming increasingly prevalent. But at the same time, digital skills needs are likely to be greatest among those in low paid, low skilled work, who also have the most pressing need for career learning. The ubiquity of smartphones can mask digital exclusion in relation to learning and work by creating the impression that individuals have functional digital skills, when in fact they can use only a limited range of phone-based features.

3. What approaches work?

3.1 Providing a clear “line of sight” from learning to progression routes and jobs is key to engaging and motivating learners. This means designing career learning provision in partnership with employers, so that it reflects the needs of the local economy and individuals can clearly see how it will prepare them for genuine employment opportunities. Building work experience, references and guaranteed job interviews into the “offer” actively promotes the value of learning. E.g. Leicester Highcross Multi-Access Centres and Birmingham HS2 STEM Entry Pathway.

3.2 Integrated local delivery partnerships provide a joined-up, coherent approach to addressing adults’ career learning needs. By bringing together outreach, engagement, IAG and learning providers, employers and agencies that can address barriers to participation such as health and financial advice services, such networks can provide the holistic support necessary for individuals to engage in and sustain learning and progress in work. E.g. Mid-Life Career Review, Unionlearn Network model and Leicester Highcross Multi-Access Centres.

3.3 Community learning, family learning and other informal learning opportunities provide effective ways of reaching and engaging adults who have little or no recent history of learning and poor prior experiences of education. They offer entry points, first steps and progression pathways to further learning and employment, for adults both in and outside the workplace. These routes can be particularly helpful for:

- Challenging negative perceptions of learning, building motivation to learn and enabling individuals to identify themselves as learners.
- Supporting individuals to develop transferable skills that are valued in the workplace, such as communication, team working and problem-solving skills. This skills development is embedded into other programmes of learning which respond more directly to individuals’ expressed concerns and motivations. Some local authority adult learning services report better outcomes in this regard from community and family learning courses than from “employability skills” courses.

Promoting **informal learning in the workplace** creates a positive culture of learning at work and can help to engage and motivate adults. Evidence from initiatives such as the Ford EDAP scheme confirms that the opportunity to take part in any learning (not only that which is related to doing the job) has a positive impact on employees’ attitudes towards learning as well as their productivity.

3.4 Delivery of IAG and learning opportunities in the workplace makes them visible and accessible for adults who might otherwise not recognise their availability and relevance. It also helps to address barriers associated with time and lack of confidence. The Mid-Life Career Review (MLCR) approach provides holistic support for adults aged 45 to 64 to explore and plan for their skills and employment needs alongside issues such

health, care and personal finance. Among others, Unionlearn currently delivers MLCR via its network of Union Learning Reps (ULRs), and reports that there is significant demand for such interventions.

3.5 Individuals benefit from developing greater awareness of their own transferable skills, the value of these in the workplace, and how to articulate them to prospective employers. Equipping people to recognise what they can offer is essential if the benefits of career learning are to be realised through progression at work. It is a key responsibility of learning and IAG providers. A range of tools has been developed by different initiatives to support individuals to identify and demonstrate their transferable skills, including transferable skills, e.g. Unionlearn “Value My Skills” card game and online tool, Leicester Employability Matrix and the National Record of Achievement.

3.6 Peer-based approaches have a proven track record of reaching individuals and supporting them to engage with and sustain learning. Union Learning Reps (ULRs) and other trusted intermediaries in the workplace and in the community (e.g. Community Learning Champions, Family Learning Champions, Workplace Learning Advocates) can play a powerful role in helping to shift both negative attitudes towards learning and individual self-perceptions, particularly among adults who have low levels of skills and qualifications. They can act as a conduit between individuals and employers, and broker links with more formal IAG services. ULRs have been shown to be highly effective at supporting their peers to complete learning episodes and to progress to further learning and / or in work. Such support to sustain learning is particularly important for those for whom learning is an unfamiliar and daunting activity or who struggle to prioritise learning alongside the other demands in their lives.

4. What is needed from the National Retraining Scheme?

4.1 The pace of change and the scale of the challenge mean that upskilling and reskilling need to become established as “common sense” ideas that are accepted as part of everyone’s working life. In this context, **the National Retraining Scheme needs to offer a universal service, not simply be targeted at specific groups**, and be located within a wider policy narrative about developing a culture of learning. Other sectors, and particularly Public Health, can provide insights into how this can be achieved. All adults should be able to see it as a service that is relevant to them, now or in the future, not a deficit service for other people. The quality of service for those in and outside employment should not differ.

4.2 A coherent, joined-up approach is key to effective local delivery. Features of this could include:

- **Connecting and co-ordinating the National Retraining Scheme with other local provision**, including community and family learning which can provide engagement activities and entry pathways, and apprenticeships and other FE / HE which can provide progression opportunities.
- The development of **robust local networks** which include strategic agencies, learning and training providers, IAG and employment services, employers, employees / learners and stakeholders such as health and mental health services.
- **Learner journey mapping** linked to career ladders, to identify and make explicit to learners and other stakeholders the options and opportunities that are available.
- Clear **branding** to provide an identify and quality assurance for learning provision, IAG and any other services that sit within the National Retraining Scheme.

Underpinning this is a need for **effective local leadership** for implementation.

4.3 To be sustainable, **a co-investment model is needed which brings together funding from government, employers and individuals**. Selling the benefits of upskilling and reskilling to both employers and individuals will therefore be critical.

- With employers, face to face employer engagement, embedded in wider business support, is likely to be most effective, particularly with SMEs where concerns about the time and cost of supporting employer training may be substantial barriers. Engagement messages need to be explicit about the benefits of training to the whole organisation.
- With individuals, powerful messages are needed about the financial and other benefits, to build motivation and commitment.
- Consideration could be given to allocating a proportion of the apprenticeship levy to upskilling and reskilling linked to the National Retraining Scheme.

4.4 **Flexibility over what training is offered and how it is delivered will be essential for making opportunities accessible to adults in work**. This flexibility could include:

- **Flexible funding arrangements** to support short episodes of learning, single modules, extended delivery, etc. For adults and employers, there may be value in specific “chunks” of learning that would enable individuals to move into other opportunities that have been identified. Full qualifications are not necessarily the most appropriate route to upskilling and reskilling, and their currency in the labour market varies considerably.
- A **credit accumulation and transfer scheme**, to enable adults to engage and re-engage with provision linked to the National Retraining Scheme as their individual circumstances allow.
- **Blended and online delivery** models and delivery in the workplace.
- **Funding for learning that may not be formally defined as “economically valuable”** in local strategies / plans, when this reflects individual aspirations and clearly represents a viable route to sustainable employment. Including such options will be necessary if individuals are expected to co-fund learning.
- **Paid time off to learn** may be necessary to enable adults in low paid roles to undertake training / retraining. Provision of this could be linked to certain priority sectors.

4.5 Upskilling and reskilling should focus more widely than simply on developing the technical skills that individuals need to do particular occupations or job roles. **Supporting individuals to gain transferable skills, including digital skills**, should be integral to training opportunities offered through the National Retraining Scheme, where a need has been identified. This is critical for providing an element of future proofing, as the obsolete jobs and growth areas of the future are unknown.

4.6 There are other **groups of adults who could potentially benefit from the National Retraining Scheme**, beyond those currently identified. These include:

- Adults made redundant who may not be claiming out of work benefits due to their circumstances and are therefore “invisible” in the system but need the kind of support that is available.
- Those in low-paid, insecure, work, perhaps on zero-hours contracts or working in the “gig economy”.
- The unwilling self-employed
- Volunteers who are using volunteering as a route into work.

4.7 A **stronger voice for learners** should inform the development and implementation of the National Retraining Scheme, so that policymakers and those with operational responsibility understand what approaches work for individuals in all their diversity.

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