

Summary of Leitch implementation stakeholder events

Overview

Following publication of Lord Leitch's report in December 2006, the Department for Education and Skills facilitated a series of events with partners to engage employers, providers and learners in discussions around how to work together to make Leitch's vision a reality. The events aimed to raise awareness of Leitch's recommendations, discuss the challenges around implementation and build consensus on how best to take them forward, within a framework of shared responsibility between Government, employers and individuals. The key outcomes of the events have been considered in the policy development process and the thinking behind the Government's Leitch Implementation Plan published on 14 June 2007.

The Skills Challenge: A Public Debate

Discussions kick-started on 8 February 2007 with an interactive debate, hosted by the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, that brought together over 300 employers, providers, stakeholders and members of the public to deliberate and vote on the practical outcomes necessary to achieve the Leitch vision.

In the first debate of the day participants talked about how to ensure skills training is designed and delivered to meet employers' needs. The most popular option was to create better links between employers and training providers. Providing expert brokers who can help businesses identify their skills needs was also viewed as important. Participants were then asked how best we make sure that everyone is included, especially those with particular barriers to learning. The top priority for participants was to communicate the benefits of learning, so that people know what's in it for them. Flexible provision to suit learners' lives was also important.

In the afternoon, tables considered how best to encourage employers to demand more skills training and take up the training available. Providing financial incentives was at the top of the list for encouraging employers to take up skills training provision, although demonstrating the impact of training on the bottom line, and building training into everyday life were also high priorities. Finally, to create a culture of learning, participants felt it was most important to clearly link training to long term career success, together with making it easier for people to access learning.

DfES / LSC regional roadshows for Further Education (FE) providers

During February, March and April 2007 the DfES and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) hosted a series of regional events for FE providers, to consider the implications of Leitch for the FE sector and to enable a system-wide dialogue on how best to accelerate the reforms needed to achieve a world class, demand-led FE system. LSC and SSDA worked together in securing 1080 people in total,

including FE system providers and key organisations within the region including Job Centre Plus, local authorities and Regional Development Agencies. Plenary sessions and interactive voting gave participants a chance to share views on the key issues, challenges and the support needed to deliver Leitch.

The deal with employers, including the Skills Pledge, was considered the most important aspect of the Leitch report by providers, with employer engagement considered the biggest barrier to successful implementation. Delegates felt they were already working hard to engage employers and to develop training solutions to meet employers' requirements. However, they also recognised that they needed to improve their organisation's employer engagement if they are to meet the Leitch ambition. Participants consistently identified changing employer attitudes to training as the most important driver for attracting greater investment from employers.

The brokerage arrangements are perceived to be not as effective in increasing employer investment, not because brokers have no role to play in principle but could be working in a better way. Two other risks that participants felt may undermine delivery of the Leitch ambition were the move to a demand-led funding model that doesn't give providers a guarantee of money, and the need to ensure that qualifications match with the business needs of employers. There was also a resounding plea from every region for the DfES and agencies to reduce the bureaucratic burden and simplify funding arrangements.

There were regional variations in the challenges faced around implementation. In London, the North West and the East and West Midlands, the heterogeneous nature of the region was identified as a significant challenge - a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is bound to fail. In Yorkshire and the Humber, the West Midlands, the East of England and the East Midlands, the priority was the need to raise aspirations to get individuals to want to learn. The need to reach out to the long-term unemployed was identified as a key challenge in the North East and in the North West, where there are large pockets of deprivation and long-term worklessness. In the South East, on the other hand, the issue is complacency and a lack of understanding of the scale of the skills problem. In the East of England and the South West, rurality poses a specific problem in terms of travel to work issues and accessibility of provision. In all regions, delegates stressed the need to market the benefits of skills and training to employers and individuals, to provide information and guidance and to stimulate demand for skills and training.

In all cases, questions posed at both the beginning and end of the day showed significant improvements in understanding about Leitch through the event.

DfES / LSC consultation on demand-led system for FE providers

The joint DfES/LSC consultation on 'Delivering World-class skills in a Demand-led system' ended on 30 March 2007. The consultation asked questions about how to implement the FE Reform White Paper and respond to the Leitch Review. Part of the consultation covered proposals for developing funding arrangements to support the wider demand-led system changes outlined in the document.

The consultation received 381 responses from a wide range of providers within the FE system, including representative bodies such as the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of Learning Providers (ALP), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Local Government Association (LGA), NIACE, Unions (including UCU and NAS/UWT) and the national learner panel.

In support of the consultation 19 events were held jointly with DfES for colleges, schools with sixth forms and providers. Two events were also held for the voluntary and community sector and local authorities. In total, around 1,280 delegates attended the various events.

The consultation analysis is being undertaken by the DfES, and it is proposed to publish a summary of the responses in the summer

NIACE events for learners

In March, NIACE facilitated three events in Wigan, Slough, and Newcastle for adult learners to discuss the Leitch report and the future of adult learning and skills provision. Delegates represented a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and the types of learning in which they were engaged. As a result, they brought a wide cross section of experience and perspectives, of both learning and life, to the discussions. A large proportion of participants were without a UK-based full level 2 qualification. Collectively, 283 delegates attended the three events.

There was a commonly held view among learners that the pace of societal and technological change would continue, and that this would affect learning and skills provision. In terms of what this meant for planning provision, learners articulated a wide range of differing and sometimes opposing views about the future of adult learning and skills, reflecting the diversity of backgrounds and geographical areas of those who attended.

Learners expressed a number of views that aligned with issues addressed in Leitch. There was general agreement on the need for better vocational training, linked to opportunities in the labour market, for example, there was considerable support for an expanded system of apprenticeships. Learners also pointed to the need for access to high quality high quality, local information, advice and guidance services, so that people can find out what is available and access provision that meets their needs, and expressed the view that adult learning and skills provision should be shaped by demand, and that learners should be in a position to articulate demand for learning that meets their needs.

However, learners generally did not recognise for themselves the common ground between their concerns and those covered in the Leitch report. The 'professional language' of learning and skills policy was a substantial obstacle to understanding.

There was no clear consensus on the question of who should pay for learning. Some individuals argued that all learning should be free to learners and funded by

government. A number of these expressed the view that, as taxpayers, they had already contributed to the funding of education, and should not be expected to 'pay again'. They argued that as a public benefit, education in general should be centrally funded. However, there was also a widespread view that employers should contribute to the funding of vocational skills. Many delegates argued that it is employers who benefit from a more highly skilled workforce, and therefore they should pay for this element of learning and skills. Delegates did not appear to perceive learning as a personal investment, and where they did acknowledge that learning might increase their capacity in the labour market, they cited the higher taxes that they would expect to pay as justification for government funding of learning.

Feedback received from various sources indicated that learners relished the opportunity to contribute to the discussion process and make their voices heard. Learners expressed a strong desire to participate in further events of this kind.

SSDA events for employers

The main focus of the Skills for Business events was to raise awareness of the Leitch skills agenda in the regions and nations through media and visits, and to bring together regional employers and stakeholders to hear from Sir Digby Jones and Professor Mike Campbell as part of each regional 'tour' on the challenge ahead and the opportunity it presents. Tours and events were held from February to May in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Bristol, and LSC and SSDA worked together in securing over 650 delegates in total, about half of whom were employers and the other half were employer-facing stakeholders.

The tours and events showed a strong employer appetite to influence the education and training systems across the UK. In the interactive voting, employers were perceived as the ones responsible for ensuring that employees have the level of skills needed in their work, as opposed to Government and the supply-side. Employers were also clear that they should have the most say in designing the content, funding regimes and delivery mechanisms which deliver education and skills development.

However, the events showed a less clear understanding among employers of the supply side landscape, and therefore gave a sense that reforms will take a while to become understood and accepted among employers. Interactive voting showed that, whilst some employers present did engage with colleges and universities to deliver the skills for their workforce, this was only of some use in some areas, or for a limited range of support. More relevant learning content and more flexibility about delivering in the workplace would encourage employers to engage with colleges and universities more.

There was consistent debate around the focus of Train to Gain on Level 2 qualifications. In some instances, this was perceived as a 'one-size fits all' solution which is more helpful to some sectors than others. Other recurring themes in discussions were the need to increase employers' perceptions of SSCs and the role they play, discussion on best SMEs can get involved in training, and agreement around the need for a better Careers Service.

The aim of the events was to reach as many employers, stakeholders and individuals as possible. To date, the events achieved between £10-15m worth of primetime coverage (including BBC Breakfast) and regional media coverage - print and broadcast - from these visits. In terms of circulation, through both editorial and advertorial content, the events reached millions of people in newspapers such as the Manchester Evening News, the Yorkshire Post, BBC and ITV regional programmes, regional radio and many other daily, weekly, news and trade publications.