Leitch Review of Skills: a learner perspective

The National Learner Panel was offered a range of topics to consider for its first full panel meeting on 15th January 2007. Panel members looked at the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills from the learner perspective. A summary of the panel’s response is outlined below.

Introduction

Val Hewson (DfES Policy Advisor), gave a presentation on the context to the report, including an overview of the recommendations, followed by a brief Question and Answer session. The panel then reviewed the main recommendations (as outlined in the report’s Executive Summary) and grouped these into three key areas for consideration:

1) the introduction of Learner Accounts and the implications for learners

2) the emphasis on increased employer engagement and investment in skills - and the tensions that this may potentially surface between the demands of employers and those of individual learners

3) the explicit focus on raising awareness and aspiration amongst learners

The panel worked in three groups to explore these themes, considering the impact of the recommendations for learners from different backgrounds, ages and learning environments. The groups decided whether or not they were broadly in favour of the recommendations, identified potential challenges and made suggestions for initiatives that could help to ensure a positive outcome for learners if the recommendations were to be implemented.

Finally, the groups came back together to share their thoughts and agree the formal panel response, which is outlined below.
Overview

The Leitch report aims to develop a system in which individuals are encouraged to take part in learning that will help to improve their employability and prosperity. It recognises the key role that FE has to play in this process – and the National Learner Panel welcomes this. Overall we feel that the recommendations in the report could help create a culture in which the development of economic skills is systematically supported and promoted. However, we would be concerned if the only value placed on learning in this country was in the development of economic skills. A culture of learning is a broader affair, embracing recreational and community learning, and it is unlikely that the report’s exclusive focus on economically viable skills will deliver this single-handedly.

Learner Accounts

The National Learner Panel is strongly in favour of a developing a system that is more led by the demands of the learner than is currently the case. We therefore support the introduction of Learner Accounts that will allow us to ‘own’ allocated funding and use it to purchase provision at a time and place that suits us. We hope that the design of Learner Accounts will enable us to wield more power as a consumer, giving us more choice about when and where we learn. A sub-group of the Panel will meet in mid March to consider and produce a response to the LSC’s consultation document ‘Delivering World-class Skills in a Demand-led System’.

In order for the accounts to truly empower and enable learners, we will need to be fully aware of the options available and feel confident that we are making the right decisions. The introduction of a new system like this is potentially confusing and raises many questions (Which courses can I use the funding for? What level of subsidy will I receive? Can I access adult and community learning courses with an account? Where is the best place for me to study this course? Will I be able to change courses or provider if it’s not working out for me? What other support (e.g. childcare, help with travel costs) is available?). Being aware of an entitlement to funding is an important first step, but we also need to understand how the system works and how the Learner Account might fit into an overall package of support.

To the extent that Learner Accounts will increase our customer buying power, we believe they can have an impact in driving up quality but we will need information about the quality and success of particular providers if we are to make informed decisions. We do have concerns, however, that a totally demand-led system could impact on a provider’s ability to plan for the long term. This combined with increasing competition between providers may result in some providers closing or quality falling. What happens then? Our fear is that, particularly for those of us in more isolated locations, we could face a reduction in breadth of provision readily available to us. We feel that there is a balance to be struck.

We have one significant question and concern, which is how can Learner Accounts benefit those who are not in work and claiming benefits. We feel there is a real need for improved links between job centres and colleges – and an alignment between the cultures of the two. Our experiences are
that job centres don’t view returning to learning as a positive step and tend to discourage individuals from going back to college because this doesn’t help them to meet their ‘back to work’ targets. We believe that there should be a shift within the job centre to focus on helping people into a career – not just a job. One practical step would be for anyone attending a job centre who does not have a full level 2, being referred immediately for careers advice and enrolled on a suitable course to improve their long-term employability, even if the course meant they were unavailable for full time work.

Broadly we feel that, if sensibly implemented, Learner Accounts could form part of a successful package that encourages individuals to access learning that is related to economically viable skills – resulting in improved take-up rates, and ultimately a more highly skilled workforce. However, if Learner Accounts are truly to benefit learners, we suggest that their introduction is accompanied by:

- **effective mechanisms to raise awareness amongst learners (and ‘potential learners’ amongst hard to reach groups) of their entitlement to subsidised course costs through accounts (e.g. learning ambassadors etc)**

- **clear guidance on how the system will work in practice, along with information about how the Learner Account functions as part of a coherent ‘package’ of support for continuation of, or return to, learning (e.g. childcare costs, EMAs, travel allowances etc)**

- **a review of access to learning for those claiming unemployment benefit to give priority to people without level 2 qualifications returning to learning without being financially penalised**

- **high quality, impartial advice and guidance that support the individual’s needs and aspirations, including information on the quality and range of provision on offer**

**Increased focus on employer engagement and investment in skills**

We wholeheartedly welcome any initiative that helps to embed a culture in which employers value the role of learning in the workplace. In our experience of work-based learning, we have found that if employers are to value learning they need to feel that they can not only influence the courses that are initially offered, but also those that are actually taken up. They often need to feel that their business will directly benefit from the particular course their employee is taking. Whilst we welcome public funding being used to support the Train to Gain initiative, we notice that the phrase ‘demand-led’ is often used to refer to individuals and employers interchangeably – and would caution against an inherent assumption that the needs of employers and individuals are one and the same.

We feel there is a risk that this approach may surface tensions between the needs/wants of the employer and the needs/wants of individuals e.g. an employer might be keen for an employee to
take a level 2 qualification that directly relates to the business and that is studied in the workplace, whereas the employee may prefer to do a level 2 GCSE that is more transferable but perhaps requires off-site study. People need to understand their options fully to be able to take decisions that best suit their individual circumstances. Is there a risk that the short term needs of the employer will be more important than the long term goals of the individual?

We support the launch of the new pledge for employers to voluntarily commit to train all eligible employees up to level 2 in the workplace – but it is crucial that this pledge is supported in practice as well as in principle. We are keen that employers who sign up to this pledge should not only commit to providing opportunities for training for all individuals but also to promoting training across the workforce (regardless of age or socio-economic factors). One of the aims of the Leitch review is to ensure that an increasingly ageing workforce is sufficiently skilled to support the future needs of the economy. If this aim is to be met, government and employers will need to work in partnership with employees of all ages to encourage them to consider the potential value of learning to them in their individual circumstances. Our concern at the possible introduction of a statutory obligation, is that employers may deliberately not recruit, or even seek to dismiss, staff without a level 2 qualification to avoid releasing employees for training.

We do see great potential, however, to use employers’ own long term business planning to help identify the skills that will be required in the workforce in future which can help inform learner choices. Equally we feel more needs to be done to raise employer awareness of and respect for vocational qualifications with better promotion of them in the workplace and in school.

We would also like to see the introduction of an award or standard that specifically recognises employer excellence in supporting work-based learning – perhaps linked to the Investors in People standard as an incentive to make the pledge and actively encourage their workforce to take up learning opportunities.

In implementing the recommendations to engage employers and encourage increased investment in skills, we recommend that the government:

• considers how potential tensions between learner demands and employer demands will be resolved

• encourages, and perhaps incentivises, employers to commit to the pledge in practice as well as in principle – supporting employees of all ages and at all stages of their work life

• raises awareness of, and promotes the value of, vocational qualifications amongst employers, employees and schools

• considers introducing a national award that recognises employer excellence in supporting work-based learning, to further incentivise the pledge.
Raising awareness and aspirations amongst learners

We support the recommendation that government creates high profile awareness campaigns and develops a more ‘user-friendly’ careers service that provides potential learners with access to more coherent information. However, in our experience, awareness is only half the battle. Of course we need good information about the options and support available – but if we don’t believe that taking part in learning can help us to achieve our individual aspirations, the message will fall on deaf ears. We need to understand the benefits of learning for us, as we are unlikely to take part in education for the benefit of the economy alone!

Even when people recognise that learning will benefit them, there are still some very real barriers that can discourage people from taking part:

- **Emotional associations**: many associate learning with feelings of stress, frustration and failure, as a result of previous negative experiences in education.
- **Social attitudes**: some people see taking part in learning as a step back – remedial action – rather than a step forward.
- **Financial constraints**: returning to learning can seem unfeasible for those with families who are wholly or heavily reliant upon their income.

Individuals need to be able to see taking part in learning as a step forward on their own personal journey – they need to understand “what’s in it for me?” and they need to have positive role models. We suggest building on local programmes that encourage individuals who have benefited from taking part in learning to share their personal experiences such as ‘learning ambassador’ schemes.

We suggest that in order to increase awareness and aspirations amongst learners, government will need to:

- **Build on learner ambassador or similar local schemes that promote individual success stories.**
- **Consider how career and guidance services can tackle some of the emotional and social barriers faced by hard to reach learners. Rather than promoting specific skills courses as soon as people walk through the door, they should signpost learning opportunities as part of an overall focus on raising self-confidence and self-esteem.**

Overall we support the recommendations of Lord Leitch but would be keen to ensure that the Government gives equal weight to the views and implications for learners, in the new demand-led system, as to the views of employers in implementing these recommendations.