Welcome to the latest edition of the Skills Accounts e-bulletin.

A Skills Account is a personalised service that helps individuals take control of their learning and working lives. By encouraging individuals to register for a Skills Account you can help them:

- Choose the right course
- Find out how much funding may be available to support them
- Call or book an appointment with a trained careers adviser
- Create an action plan with their skills and achievements
- Share their achievements with others

Trials of Skills Accounts began in the South East and East Midlands in September 2008. In March, Skills Accounts were introduced in the West Midlands to support Jobcentre Plus (JCP) customers participating in the trial of the integrated employment and skills service. The aim of the first year of the trials has been to ensure that what is being offered through a Skills Account meets with individuals’ needs and expectations.

This e-bulletin provides our partners and stakeholders with the latest information on Skills Accounts and will keep them updated during the trials.

If you would like additional names added to the distribution list, or if you would like to be removed from this list, please contact shagufta.mustafa@lsc.gov.uk

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1. EVALUATING THE SKILLS ACCOUNTS TRIALS

The evaluation of any trial is critical to the ultimate success of the project. From the outset our commitment has been to develop a service that ensures individuals are equipped with the tools they need to take control of their learning and working lives. Our partners have contributed significantly to the development and implementation of Skills Accounts over the past year.

Between January and March 2009, an independent research company conducted analysis of key stakeholders’ experiences of Skills Accounts. This analysis included:

- visits to providers in the trial regions
- visits to stakeholders
- focus groups with learners from strategic learning providers

We would like to take this opportunity to share the key findings and our responses with you.

Overall views on Skills Accounts

Generally, Skills Accounts are particularly useful for people starting out in their careers or those looking to change jobs. The value to learners already on courses was not so clear.

You also fed back that partners would like more information on the longer-term vision for Skills Accounts, so that they can understand more fully how the trials complement the bigger picture.

We were always aware that the phased introduction of Skills Accounts might mean that they were initially more useful to new learners, but we hope that the introduction of a personal learner record and the verified record will be a useful additional service for those already in learning. With regard to the longer-term vision we are well advanced with plans for academic year 09/10, which will see a significant expansion of the offer – see further information in item number 3.

The Skills Voucher

It is clear from this part of the evaluation that individuals are genuinely interested in getting accurate information about the level of fees and funding that are available to them. Indeed, some are surprised by how high the levels of Government funding are and many think that their courses offer excellent value for money.

Participants in the research recommended that perhaps the voucher is not needed. A basic and clear explanation of costs and funding would make it easier for individuals to understand, and in turn be able to make informed choices about their learning.

As a result of this, and separate feedback from providers, we intend to phase out the voucher during Autumn 2009. It will be replaced with a new tool which allows learners quickly and easily to check whether they are eligible for support towards the cost of their course. This will also allow learners to check whether they may be eligible for an Adult Learning Grant or Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work.

Experiences on the frontline – strategic learning providers

Enrolment staff focussed on a number of practical issues relating to Skills Accounts. It is clear that promotion and awareness has been led by staff providing information and advice. Reassuringly, strategic learning providers reported no significant additional pressure on their workload up to this point in the trials, but it was noted that there may be a greater impact as enrolments increase over the busy summer period.
Many frontline staff agreed that implementation of Skills Accounts has been straightforward and not overly bureaucratic. They have been keen to support the trials and have greater input into their evolution. Some issues have been raised regarding implementation.

As a result of this feedback, we have reviewed the training materials to reflect the changes to the offer and will also be providing quick guides, leaflets and a comprehensive training manual.

**Experiences on the frontline – nextstep and the Careers Advice Service (CAS)**

It was found that Careers Advice Service advisers were extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic about Skills Accounts. They thought that Skills Accounts were a valuable new service, and that it was quick and easy to explain the value to callers.

*nextstep* advisers did not report such a positive experience, citing lack of time as a barrier to opening a Skills Account for their customers.

We are taking steps to raise awareness amongst *nextstep* advisers and improve the registration process, making it easier for advisers and their customers.

**Impressions of the Skills Accounts website**

General feedback about the site has been positive, although some felt that the registration process could be clearer. You also told us that you would like to see more guidance on when to use particular tools.

A number of people also thought that the site would benefit from more pictures so that it appeals to those who respond best to visual stimuli. Overall, users felt that the site was helpful, especially the *Course Search* tool. Feedback also suggested that users thought having a website that brings together in one place information on careers, qualifications and funding was useful.

> “It’s straightforward and tells you what you need to know. I think it explains itself. I think ‘straightforward’ is good, otherwise you’re on the web for hours just trying to find what you are looking for.”

Once the main tools are developed, it is our intention to redesign the site including the look and feel, and to introduce a visual tool which will help learners to identify easily which services within Skills Accounts are most relevant to them. The website will also feature additional graphics, frequently asked questions (FAQ), case studies and content which is relevant as part of their learning journey. Our aim is to have the new site available towards the end of October. Until then, we will hope that you will continue to encourage learners to use their Skills Account.
Taking the evaluation results onboard
Hopefully you will feel that your feedback is helping to shape the trials so that Skills Accounts improve the service offered to learners. We would like to thank all those who were interviewed, and hope that you will continue to support the trials as they develop.

2. NEW WEBSITE FUNCTIONS GO LIVE!
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We are continually adding new functions to the site, providing learners with useful tools to help them take even more control over their learning and working lives. The latest functions include:

- a Learning Record
- access to a Skills Action Plan
- easier access to Careers Support
- a Learner Statement
- a password reset function

For further details on these new Skills Accounts services, please refer to the June Skills Accounts E-bulletin.

Systems have been thoroughly tested and are all set for launch! If you have any questions, queries or feedback for the team then please let us know through the Feedback Form on the Skills Accounts website.

3. THE SKILLS ACCOUNTS VISION
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We have come a long way since the Government articulated its ambition for Skills Accounts in World Class Skills (July 2007). Since then, Skills Accounts have become a reality during their trials in the South East and East Midlands regions. They have also formed a part of the Integrated Employment and Skills trials in the West Midlands. Since the start of the trials, some 20,000 applications for Skills Accounts have been processed, demonstrating that there is a demand from learners for a service to empower them to take control of their learning and working lives.

Looking forward, Skills Accounts will be expanding incrementally across the country prior to national roll-out of the service as part of the new Advancement Service in Autumn 2010. From September 2009, Skills Accounts will expand from the East Midlands and South East to all regions. In addition, each region will test the offer with new specific customer audiences such as Learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities, and carers. A targeted roll-out will allow us to continue to test the services that Skills Accounts provide so that we can be confident that the service meets the needs of all its users.

Further details of these plans will be included in the August edition of the e-bulletin.

4. SUPPORTING MATERIALS AND HELPLINE
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There is a range of Skills Accounts materials available for you to download from the LSC Campaign Resources Site.

You can use these materials to support your own campaigns and communications. Once you have registered on the site you will have access to collateral and materials relating to all of the different LSC campaigns.
Supporting materials for Skills Accounts include:

- *NEW* Updated leaflet for learners
- A3 posters
- Banner stands
- PowerPoint presentation templates
- Web and advertising copy

**Helpline**
The helpline offers support to all Skills Accounts stakeholders who would like further information or support. It can be reached on 020 7413 3400.

**5. CONTACT INFORMATION**
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For further information about the Skills Accounts trials in your region, please contact your regional LSC Skills Accounts team.

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We hope you have found this edition of the Skills Accounts e-bulletin useful! If you have any queries or questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please look out for the next edition of the Skills Accounts e-bulletin on 28 August 2009.