LSC Research and Evaluation Plan 2007–08

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Of interest to everyone involved in the research and evaluation of learning and skills across England
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Introduction

1 The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has four major research themes for 2007–08:
   • productivity and competitiveness
   • young people
   • employability and social cohesion
   • the further education system.

2 These themes are closely aligned to our national priorities and will be the main areas of focus for our work over the next 12 months.

3 This document sets out our main areas of research interest under each of the themes.

4 In addition, we will be carrying out a series of evaluations to look at the impact of policies, programmes and trials to inform future learning and skills policy.

5 Details of our projects, both those that are published and those that are still under way, are available on our research website (http://research.lsc.gov.uk).

Keeping in Touch

6 We produce a monthly newsletter on our research and evaluations and other published research relating to learning and skills. You can subscribe to and access the newsletter by following the links from our research website (http://research.lsc.gov.uk).
Our Annual Statement of Priorities (LSC, 2006a) sets out how research and evaluation will be used in the LSC:

We will use our research and evaluation to underpin decisions at all levels across the organisation:

- in policy direction and implementation
- in commissioning, planning and investment decisions locally and regionally.

The Annual Statement of Priorities opens with a brief section that sets out our commitment to:

- raising our game
- simplifying the way we work
- being clear about what is driving us.

These statements have been used to define three of the principles that we have used to shape the role of research and evaluation:

- improve
- simplify
- clarify.

We have added a fourth principle. Essentially, the use and impact of research and evaluation will only be realised if they properly connect with the:

- development and delivery of policy and programmes
- other functions in the LSC
- work of regional and local teams and the interests of partners and stakeholders
- LSC’s business cycle.

Evaluation is critical to providing the evidence base that will illustrate the return on investment that the UK is getting from public expenditure on learning and skills.

Over and above this, research and evaluation will seek to enhance the overall context of our work by:

a understanding and monitoring changes in the environment for learning and skills
b improving supply and demand-side policy work by building an understanding of:

- (global) best practice in learning and skills; what works best, why and how
- where and how policy has an effect.
Productivity and Competitiveness

Migration

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This work will examine the impact of migration on learning and skills in the workforce and communities. It will involve looking at trends and experiences and exploring potential scenarios and possible impacts on learning and skills in the future. Part of the work will look at employers’ attitudes and experiences with workers who were born outside the UK, to help inform our policy on migration and skills.

Understanding Large Employers

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This work will focus on gaining a better insight into the training needs, perceptions and attitudes of large employers. We will draw on the views of those employers who currently work with the National Employer Service and other employers to aid our understanding of how we can develop a further education system that is responsive to employers. One key output will be case studies looking at the benefits that large employers gain from training.

National Employers Skills Survey

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This is one of the largest surveys of employers in England, covering up to 75,000 businesses. The project is undertaken in collaboration with the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). Building on surveys as far back as 1999, it was conducted annually between 2003 and 2005, providing an insightful, longitudinal perspective that measures trends over time. The large sample size allows geographical and sectoral analysis that can be further disaggregated by size of company.

With the continued expansion of the global market, it is critical that we understand the skills issues facing employers. NESS provides detailed information on the incidence, extent and nature of the skills problems facing employers in England. It asks about skills shortages, vacancies and investment in training and also covers recruitment and skills gaps within the existing workforce.

Key findings from the National Employers Skills Survey 2005

17
Key findings from NESS 2005 (LSC, 2006b) are as follows.

- The skills gap has been closing steadily since 2001.
- Employer attitudes to training have become increasingly positive – the number of staff trained in the 12-month period is equivalent to 61 per cent of the current workforce.
- Employers spent approximately £33.3 billion on training over 12 months.
- The incidence and extent of recruitment difficulties in the labour market show little change over the previous two surveys.

Skills in England

18
Published annually since 2001, Skills in England is a synthesis of the latest research and analysis. It helps develop a shared understanding of the current supply of skills and the demand for them, both in the immediate and medium term. The report is a collaborative publication overseen by a range of key partners.

The 2006 series will include not only the main report but also a series of seminars to discuss the emerging findings and the issues and challenges that they present for learning and skills in England. During 2007 there will be four seminars: the first will be held in May and will discuss ‘flexicurity’.

‘Flexicurity’ is a new key term in the debate about the future of European labour markets and the development of social policies. It is emphasised in the revised Lisbon Agenda. Flexicurity refers to making high levels of labour flexibility compatible with high levels of security. Thus, flexicurity means not having to choose between flexibility and security, but rather trying to reconcile flexible forms of work with guarantees of social protection, such as access to training and other forms of active labour market policy.

Learning at Work

21
Understanding how people learn at work is key to the development of future learning and skills policies. Research will aim to explore the pedagogy in the workplace – both formal and informal – and the relationship with skills, qualifications and productivity.
Young People

The Empowered Learner

As we look forward to a more demand-led system and to the implementation of the new Diplomas, it is important to have an understanding not only of how people make choices now, but also of how young people will choose in the future in the light of technological and societal change. To develop our thinking in this area, we want to commission several pieces of work including ‘think pieces’ and studies with young people on the subject of choice.

Not in Education, Employment or Training

The Government has an ambition of seeing 90 per cent of young people aged 17 in some form of learning. In the light of the possibility of raising the leaving age for compulsory education, we are continuing to develop our understanding of those young people who are not attracted to learning – who they are, where they are and what their motivations are. (Such young people are sometimes referred to as being ‘not in education, employment or training’, or NEET.) This work will begin with a detailed segmentation exercise and continue by matching examples of proven effective practice with the segmented client group and identifying areas where further innovation in learning programmes is required.
Employability and Social Cohesion

Learner Support
24
Supporting learners to undertake learning is a key policy for driving up participation, particularly for those with the greatest need. We will be undertaking research to understand who accesses and benefits most from learner support funds such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and providers’ discretionary learner support. This work will aim to obtain a better understanding across the provision not only of the types of qualifications but also of the socio-demographic profiles of those individuals who are supported.

Role of Further Education in Community Cohesion
25
The role of further education (FE) colleges in the economy has been clearly set out in the 2006 FE White Paper (DfES, 2006) and in the Foster Review of Further Education (Foster, 2005). We know that colleges in particular have good reputations locally, even when the national perception differs. Colleges have been involved in working with their local communities for a long time and many retain this as a core part of their mission. This work will explore the role that FE plays in encouraging community cohesion, quantifying what the contribution has been to date, and debating what it might be in the future and how this complements the economic mission of the sector.

Contribution of Learning and Skills to Employability and Progression
26
This branch of research aims to understand what impact there may be on the improved employability of individuals who have undertaken an FE course. It will focus on those who were not in employment at the start of the course and specifically on those claiming income-related benefits and Jobseeker’s Allowance. The secondary aims of the research will be to understand what the wider advantages of learning have been in terms of personal motivation and social benefits.

27
This work will use learners who have undertaken learning over the previous three years to look at the impact that FE programmes have on the employability of individuals.

28
The survey will be designed to address six main objectives. These are to:

- understand why respondents felt that they were out of employment before starting a course
- analyse why respondents decided to enter learning (for example, to improve employability or for other reasons) and to develop an understanding of what made them choose a particular course
- analyse the nature of the immediate destinations of learners who were not employed at the start of the course (for example employment, further learning or training), differentiating training destinations by level and type of qualification
- assess the impact of learning and the extent to which the experience has altered the individual’s welfare and views on education
- look at the longer-term destinations of those who completed learning in order to assess both sustained benefits and deferred benefits
- assess whether certain demographic groups benefit from learning in different ways.
Further Education System

Online Panel Capability

29
We are developing concepts and proposals for online panels of learners and workers in the sector to increase our ability to get rapid feedback on key issues, topics and policies.

Reputation and Stakeholders

30
Improving the reputation of the sector has been a continued theme in recent reviews and the 2006 FE White Paper (DfES, 2006). To understand better what informs reputation in the sector, to give a baseline and to inform a strategy to improve reputations, we have commissioned a survey of key stakeholders nationally, regionally and locally.

Fees Research

31
The policy to rebalance the contributions of the state, the individual and employers to the cost of learning has translated into a change in fees policy. We have commissioned research to understand the impact of the policy changes on colleges and providers and have extended this to cover privately-funded work. We want to explore further the impacts across geographies and across client groups to monitor the policy and to reach a greater understanding of the amount that people will pay for learning.

National Learner Satisfaction Survey

32
The National Learner Satisfaction Survey has been carried out since 2001/02; we have now published four surveys. Learners are questioned about their satisfaction levels relating to different aspects of their learning experience, including the:

- quality of teaching
- management of learning
- pre-entry advice and guidance
- learner support
- benefits and impacts of learning.

33
The 2004/05 survey gives the fourth year of results and shows the highest overall learner satisfaction levels to date. A national sample of over 43,000 learners was included in the 2004/05 survey. They were studying across a range of programmes including FE, Apprenticeships and adult and community learning.

34
The results give a national picture and a wealth of information for different subgroups of learners. The results for FE provision can be analysed by:

- age
- gender
- ethnicity
- area of learning
- qualification level
- disability and/or learning difficulty
- prior attainment level
- regional and local level.

35
We are currently piloting a learner satisfaction survey with offenders in custody as part of the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS).

36
The 2006/07 survey will publish the key findings in December 2007 and the full reports in spring 2008.

Towards World-class Skills: A Comparison Series

37
The recent Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006) has prompted an increased number of comparisons with other nations. Much of the focus of the published research has been at whole-system level. There are undoubtedly lessons we can learn from the learning and skills systems used in other countries. We want to add to the growing knowledge base of international comparisons by focusing on best practice from around the world on the following areas where we have emerging policy drivers:

- learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- moving people from state benefits into work through learning and qualifications
- adult learning markets – developing them and what they consist of
- engaging young people in learning.

Economic Impact

38
We are looking to define and measure the economic impact of the FE system as a whole and to understand better its collective contribution in economic terms.

Framework for Excellence

39
Research will be undertaken to look at how we best measure provider responsiveness to employers and employer satisfaction with learning and skills provision.

Supporting and Use of Investment

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We will undertake research to look at how public funding is invested, and at the contribution of private investment in the learning and skills system. This work will assist the development of the National Learning Model.
Evaluation

41 We evaluate all our programmes and funding streams, with a particular focus on pilots and new programmes to ensure that they are meeting their aims and in order to inform future roll-outs.

42 All evaluations are designed to look at the return on investment that is being gained from the use of public funds in learning and skills. The following is a list of policy areas, products and services on which we will perform evaluations during 2007–08.

43 We have an integrated approach to evaluation and management information, ensuring that we are taking advantage of the rich data source that we have in the Individualised Learner Record to assess the impact of new policies and programmes on learners and employers.

Productivity and Competitiveness

44 Evaluations will be conducted for:

- national skills academies
- Train to Gain: survey of employers to examine the level of service and the satisfaction that employers have with brokers (including ease of accessing training, appropriate delivery methods and support from brokers)
- Train to Gain: operational review to establish by survey whether the brokerage service improves the supply of training to meet employers’ needs and whether it manages customers’ needs well
- Train to Gain: employee evaluation to assess the employee’s journey through the service, with each stage covered and to identify those areas requiring further investigation explored in-depth
- Train to Gain impact survey
- prior qualifications survey
- thematic Level 2 and Level 3 evaluations.

Young People

45 Evaluations will be conducted for:

- EMA
- New Entrepreneur Scholarships
- Young Apprenticeships
- e-learning
- Diplomas.

Employability and Social Cohesion

46 Evaluations will be conducted for:

- Career Development Loans
- the delivery of learner support in FE
- Foundation Learning Tier
- New Deal for Skills (adult learning option)
- New Deal for Skills (skills coaching trials)
- Adult Learning Grant
- OLASS
- review of transferred Jobcentre Plus skills training trials
- skills for jobs.

Further Education System

47 Evaluations will be conducted for:

- impact of capital expenditure on skills
- fee remission practice and use of learner support funds
- contestability
- learner accounts
- 19–25 entitlement
- impact of the UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme and publicly funded trial of the Qualifications and Credit Framework
- longitudinal impact of centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs)
- introduction of demand-led funding
- use of competition to secure learning provision.
References

DFES (2006) Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances, Norwich: TSO.


LSC (2006b) National Employers Skills Survey 2005, Coventry: LSC.

LSC (2006a) Raising our Game: Our Annual Statement of Priorities 2007/08, Coventry: LSC.