Communications briefing

25 July 2008
Purpose
This pack has been prepared for use by LSC, DIUS, strategic partners, providers and those involved in the forthcoming Skills Accounts trials. It will provide the latest communications material, including messages and some FAQs and works in conjunction with the factual briefing on the trials. This document will continue to be updated on a regular basis. We welcome your input and contributions.

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KEY HEADLINE INFORMATION

1. A Skills Account is a personalised service that allows learners to access a range of information and careers advice about how to improve their skills and access financial support. Learners will be able to access:

   a. The careers advice services, which provide information, advice and guidance so that learners can understand their options when deciding about their skills and careers.

   b. A voucher which will indicate their eligibility for public funding and show the value of their chosen course. Where the information provided indicates that the learner may be entitled to full fee remission this will be shown on the voucher. This can then be taken to an LSC approved training provider.

   c. A secure record of their learning, that can, with the learner’s permission, be shared so that they can review their skills and choose the courses and the qualifications they need to progress.

2. Skills Accounts will play an important role in supporting both learners and those seeking employment. In the East Midlands and South East we are trialling Skills Accounts for any learner who may wish to study FE type provision.

3. For learners seeking work it is also important that a Skills Account supports their journey to sustainable employment. We are therefore also trialling Skills Accounts for JCP customers in four other locations over the year: West Midlands, Manchester, London and the East of England. For Jobcentre Plus customers a Skills Account will be one of a range of new services being developed to provide support to help them to gain sustainable employment. Skills Accounts therefore need to be tested within the wider context of an integrated employment and skills service, hence the reason why they are being included within the IES trials.

4. In developing Skills Accounts we have been careful to learn the lessons that led to the closure of the Individual Learner Accounts programme. For Skills Accounts the contracting and payment mechanisms will be based on mainstream LSC processes through the adult learner responsiveness model. Therefore no actual money will transfer “outside the system”. Skills Accounts provision will only be delivered through providers approved to receive LSC funding and who continue to comply with the LSC’s rigorous quality assurance arrangements.
SKILLS ACCOUNTS – FAQ

THE SKILLS ACCOUNT CONCEPT

1. **What is a Skills Account?**
   A Skills Account will give learners access to a new range of services which will help them take control of their learning and working life. Through a Skills Account, individuals will receive greater choice and support, and will therefore have a sense of ownership over their own future. They are designed to provide a gateway through which learners can access personalised careers advice including details of courses in their area, and their eligibility for Government funding to meet the costs of learning. By highlighting for learners the actual value of their chosen course we aim to encourage more learners to invest in their own skills. In introducing Skills Accounts we are not altering any of the existing eligibility criteria or entitlements. A Skills Account will also include a confidential record of an individual’s achievements so that they can share these with employers, careers services or others who may find it helpful. As the service develops the range of products and services will increase so that a Skills Accounts becomes the one-stop-shop for learning.

The Skills Account voucher will be personalised and calculated using information provided by the learner. A learner will be able take their voucher to a range of providers approved by the LSC to receive funding through the adult learner responsive funding model.

Each Skills Account holder will also have a Unique Learner Number (ULN) which will be used to link the different services and build a verified record of their learning. The learner will be issued with their own password and will be able to access the service via a website.

BACKGROUND

2. **What is the history of the Skills Accounts?**
   Lord Leitch in his 2006 report “Prosperity for all in a global economy: world class skills” first recommended that public funding for skills should be routed through a learner account. The Government accepted this recommendation and in “World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England” outlined their intention to introduce Skills Accounts in 2008/09.

3. **Was there not a trial of Adult Learner Accounts (ALAs) last year?**
   Yes. A small-scale trial of ALAs started in the South East and East Midlands in 2007. The target was for 4,000 people to open an ALA in the first year and we have comfortably exceeded that target. The ALA trial has already provided us with some valuable lessons which we have used to inform the design of Skills Accounts:

   - ensuring that all learners understand the full value of their Account and the services available to support them
   - the importance of full integration of the service across all delivery partners

Alignment of the marketing of the Accounts to learners’ own aspirations, our evaluations found that:

   - one-third of ALA learners chose their course to help them get a new or better job or gain promotion
   - a further third chose their course to help them move on in education

Learners really do value choice and the support which helps them realise this choice.

Learners also welcome advice on progression opportunities and over half of those surveyed reported that they had accessed further careers advice since they opened their ALA.
4. What has been done to remedy the fiasco that surrounded the Individual Learner Account trial?
Plans for Skills Accounts have thoroughly addressed each of the issues that resulted in the closure of the original Individual Learner Accounts programme. The payment mechanisms will be based on standard LSC processes. As a result, only providers approved by the LSC will access funding and this funding will never leave the secure systems used to pay providers. Skills Accounts provision will only be delivered through accredited providers that meet strong LSC quality assurance tests. Eligibility for support is in line with existing policies and entitlements.

TRIALS

5. What is the purpose of the trial? What is the expected outcome of the trial stage?
The purpose of the trial is to test arrangements for providing learners with a high quality Skills Account service. Our focus is firmly on the quality of the customer experience and we have therefore avoided setting specific targets for the take-up of Skills Accounts. We have of course modelled volumes that we expect to open an Account, but we not do this at the expense of quality. Once we have established that the service is working well we seek to expand the roll-out.

6. When will the trials start and how long will they go on?
The Skills Accounts trials will begin with implementing and testing the systems in September 2008 in the South East and East Midlands. The Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials will also begin in September in the West Midlands and we are currently working through arrangements of when best to introduce Skills Accounts into these trials. During the first year we will be evaluating the performance of the service so that we are able to make Skills Accounts available in the other regions of England from 2009/10. A full national rollout will begin in 2010, from when we will gradually increase numbers so that Skills Accounts are fully rolled out by 2015.

7. Why were the South and East Midlands regions chosen?
We were keen to build on the experience gained in developing and delivering ALAs and therefore felt it important to build on the expertise in these regions. We were also mindful of the fact that many of the providers who had helped develop ALAs were very keen to take forward Skills Accounts. The four regions participating in the IES trials were selected after consultation between Regional and National Office colleagues, in conjunction with DWP and JCP.

8. What are the expected costs for the trial stage and for implementing the Skills Accounts later on?
Inevitably, there are some costs associated with developing and promoting a new service, but the delivery of Skills Accounts by providers and the careers services will largely be accommodated within existing allocations. The specific costs associated with the trial are still to be finalised.

9. What if the trial fails?
Whilst we do not believe the trials will fail, we are very mindful of the complexities associated with introducing a new service which must be integrated with a range of delivery partners. That is why we emphasise that the purpose is to test how this new service can be best delivered to learners and to identify any potential problems or shortcomings in the service before it is rolled-out on a larger scale. As such we see this as an evolutionary process which may change as we learn what works best for learners. We will closely manage the experience of learners on a day-to-day basis to ensure they receive a high quality service. In addition we will also commission independent evaluation of its performance.
10. **What will Skills Accounts be called in the trial stage?**
Skills Accounts will be called just that, Skills Accounts, throughout the trial stage 2008/09. Further research into future branding, including the name, will continue as the trial rolls out.

11. **Are timings due to run according to plan? Will the trials definitely start in September?**
Currently timings are running to plan, with a staged roll-out beginning in September.

12. **How many learners are expected to take part in the trial period? What is the projected available capacity of Skills Accounts in each of the trial areas?**
There are no targets in terms of volumes for the Skills Accounts trials. The purpose of the trial is to create a quality system for the learner and to ensure that learners enjoy a positive Skills Account experience. Based on discussions with regions we estimate that around 30-40,000 learners might be expected to open a Skills Accounts through one of the channels. Of course, as with any advice service we would not expect all of these to progress directly into learning. However, in order to ensure that we can run a valid evaluation of the programme we need just 4,500 individuals to open a Skills Account.

**HOW WILL SKILLS ACCOUNTS BE DELIVERED?**

13. **Will there be an online platform for Skills Accounts? When will it go online?**
Because Skills Accounts are a service to learners we must ensure that they can open a Skills Account in a variety of ways depending on the learners’ preference. Initially we will test registration through a provider and the careers advisory services, both the face to face services and via the adult careers helpline, currently run by learndirect national telephone advice line. However in November 2008 we will introduce an online service which will allow learners to open their own Skills Account through a web portal.

14. **How and where can a learner sign up for a Skills Account?**
In the East Midlands and the South East systems will be tested from September and small numbers of learners will be able to sign up for a Skills Account through one of the strategic partner colleges from September. The careers advisory services (e.g. nextstep, learndirect etc) will gradually come on line from October. But it is important to stress that we expect it take a little time for the service to bed down, but by January 2009 we would expect to see significant numbers of learners registering for a Skills Account.

Additionally, we are also committed to testing an apprenticeship credit via Skills Accounts. More information will be available shortly on how this service will operate and where it will be first introduced.

15. **Who will be responsible for co-ordinating all activities?**
The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) along with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) is leading trials in the South East and East Midlands.

The Integrated employment and Skills trials being led by the LSC, DIUS, DWP and Jobcentre Plus.

16. **How do you ensure the product will be easy to understand and not be too complex?**
Testing and evaluation of the policy, product and systems will take place throughout the trials’ development and roll out. Different groups of stakeholders, including learners, have been and will continue to be consulted during the testing, trialling and evaluation processes. Clear evaluation of the systems and policies will commence as the trials roll out to enable changes to be made to policy and systems as and when required.
COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

17. **How will Skills Accounts be marketed in the trial regions?**
   Currently there are plans to market Skills Accounts through regional radio and press adverts. Timings for marketing are yet to be finalised. We are also developing a range of marketing materials which will enable partners to effectively promote Skills Accounts. As individuals participating in the IES trials are already in contact with the system, we do not envisage a need to promote Skills Accounts more widely at this stage.

18. **When will printed collateral be available?**
   All collateral will be issued to stakeholders later in the summer.

19. **When will you start communicating about Skills Accounts to the press?**
   Communication to regional press will commence in the autumn.

20. **Do any materials already exist already?**
   No. We are currently developing a range of materials for strategic partners and providers to use. This will be issued in the form of a toolkit designed for specific stakeholder audiences. It will include introductory information and instructions on what to do next. We will also be issuing a customised e-bulletin which will be distributed monthly. The first of these will be sent out in July.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE

21. **Will there be a helpline for stakeholders?**
   Stakeholders will be able to contact the email and telephone helpline on skillscampaign@lsc.gov.uk or 020 7413 3400. This is now available.

22. **Will there be a helpline for learners?**
   Learners will be able to access the services of learndirect through its national helpline numbers. Learners will be offered Skills Accounts as part of learndirect’s services.

   A support service is currently being commissioned to provide the national technical support line for Skills Accounts, for example to support individuals who may have lost their passwords or log-in information.

   Regional partners and stakeholders should contact their regional LSC Skills Accounts Team for advice/queries.

23. **Will there be training on the Skills Accounts services/products for stakeholder staff?**
   Yes. There will be a series of seminars and workshops throughout the summer and autumn months to inform stakeholders about the trials. Training will be available to assist the careers advisory services, learndirect and learning providers’ frontline staff. Training materials to support frontline staff will also be available in time to help the trial implementation.

THE ROLE OF FE COLLEGES

24. **Do all colleges in the trial regions have to take part in the trials?**
   We want all providers in the region to benefit from the Skills Accounts. Therefore all need to be aware that they may encounter learners with a voucher who wish to study at their institution.

   However in the trials, 20 providers in total (these are known as strategic partners) have volunteered to register learners for a Skills Account. There are 12 in the South East and 8 in the East Midlands. This is important because it allows us test this key route into a Skills Account in a controlled way.
The National Learning Directory will be used to provide information for learners and so it is vital that all providers in the trial areas ensure that their course information is accurate and actively maintained on the National Learning Directory, through Course Manager. Providers upload their details using Course Manager

http://www.learning-directory.co.uk/pls/cgi-bin-data/page_pls_cp_login?s_type=LD.

Course Manager is the technical system within the NLD, which all providers need to use in order to update and maintain their course information. Course Manager is a tool designed for learning providers to expand and increase their marketing reach. It enables providers to add, update and archive courses online quickly and easily and at a time that suits. Whenever information is updated in Course Manager, it is loaded into the National Learning Directory. By ensuring that this information is as complete as possible, learners will be able to accurately search for relevant courses offered by all providers, and not just those strategic partners involved in the trials.

More information is available from: http://www.advice-resources.co.uk/learningproviders/newproviders/cmhelp.pdf. “Advice resources” is also the location where providers should get information on what they should do to get their data uploaded onto the NLD. http://www.advice-resources.co.uk/.

During the first year of the trial all FE colleges within the trial areas could encounter learners with a ‘voucher’, these learners will already have opened a Skills Account and should therefore be taken through normal enrolment processes. Those learners that go to a college off their own back will still need to be flagged as having a Skills Account in order that the LSC can evaluate the service. Further details concerning how this process will operate are currently being developed in conjunction with providers.

25. How can schools / colleges / universities get involved if they want to? Where can they find additional information?
Strategic partners have already volunteered to trial the system in the East Midlands and the South East. These strategic partners begin testing the systems from September. During this initial phase, relatively small numbers of learners will be registered for Skills Accounts. Regional providers that are not part of the trials will receive information about the progress of the trials. They will also receive advice about what they should do if they are approached by a learner who has opened a Skills Account and printed off their learner voucher.

A monthly e-bulletin will be sent to strategic partners & stakeholders to keep them informed about the trials, the first of these will be sent out in July.

26. What will the additional workload be? Will additional staff be required?
For the purposes of the initial launch of Skills Accounts, providers should not require additional staff.

STAKEHOLDER AWARENESS

27. What has been the feedback and experience of stakeholders and consumers who have taken part in the ALA trials in the East Midlands and the South East? How many have been involved – both in terms of stakeholders and learners?
Briefings have taken place within both regions with providers that offered ALAs. Discussions have also taken place with the National Learner Panel to gain a useful insight into their thoughts on the process.

Further information on feedback can be found under question 3.
Additional briefings and presentations involving national and regional LSC staff will continue through the summer and through the implementation of the trials throughout 2008/09.

28. **What is the level of understanding, compliance and buy-in from Jobcentre Plus frontline staff? And from nextstep, Connexions and leardirect/Ufi?**

Briefings for leardirect staff are scheduled to take place as part of the Skills Account implementation plan throughout the summer.

Meetings covering all of the new arrangements for the nextstep service will take place in Coventry on the 21 and 22 July. This will include a session on Skills Accounts. Specific training events for nextstep staff are currently being scheduled. All front line staff will have the opportunity to attend a training session.

29. **What is the level of understanding, compliance and buy-in from the strategic partner’s employees?**

Briefings to strategic partners have been taking place over the last few months. Nominated attendees have been asked to cascade information through to colleagues. Ongoing support to all participating providers will be available through LSC staff. Thematic sub-groups will involve an array of strategic partner representatives. This will help information being shared within the strategic partner organisation.

**INTERDEPENDENCIES**

30. **How is the adult advancement and careers service (aacs) developing and will there be regular exchanges of information as the two are mutually dependent?**

The aacs will come on stream on 2010. It will be integral to the delivery of Skills Accounts. In developing Skills Accounts we are working very closely with aacs policy teams to ensure that the two services are aligned and integrated in a way which works best for the learner.

31. **Will the Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) system be ready for the two different types of trial? Will customers be able to use the internet service during the trials, and from its commencement?**

MIAP will produce Unique Learning Numbers (ULNs) for Skills Accounts customers for the purposes of the 2008/09 trials. It is unlikely that ULNs will be produced in real time for the beginning of the trial, but there is a plan to produce and issue a batch of ULNs on a regular basis during the trials so that all new holders of a Skills Account can access the full range of services.

**DATA PROTECTION**

32. **How far have efforts gone to ensure online data protection?**

Freedom of Information and data protection issues are taken extremely seriously by both the LSC and DIUS. Both are doing everything to ensure customers’ online data protection during the trials. The developers of the systems have worked closely with the relevant LSC data protection teams to ensure that any systems trialled meet existing data protection requirements. Those registering and opening a Skills Account will receive detailed information about how their details will be stored and used.

**SUCCESS MEASURES AND EVALUATION**

33. **How will success be measured once Skills Accounts are implemented?**

The purpose of these trials is to flush out any issues that may impede the successful national roll out of Skills Accounts in 2010. Therefore the evaluation results produced during the trials will contribute to the Skills Accounts development process. The evaluation will consider whether the systems have added value to the learner’s experience and whether the aims of the trial have been achieved.
In the long term, the aim is that Skills Accounts will help create a “culture of learning”, by motivating individuals to take-up, invest and progress in learning, and to stick with their chosen courses and achieve more when they do. Accounts are also intended to impact on “the system”, driving a high quality FE sector that responds to learner demand, as well as contributing to the integration of employment and skills.

However, due to the broad, infrastructural nature of the Skills Accounts project, it is difficult to disaggregate the specific impact of Accounts beyond an aspirational level. DIUS and LSC are therefore undertaking analytical work through a data review and focus groups to strengthen our understanding of why different groups take up Skills Accounts, which will go towards informing our approach to evaluation and developing a full benefits realisation plan.

Below are listed some of the initial desired strategic benefits which were identified in the Trial Business Case. They cover the wider Skills Accounts programme through to the full Skills Accounts product itself. The 08-09 trials will move us towards these ‘End Goal’ benefits.

**Individuals**
- Will be more motivated to take up and progress in learning that releases their talents and realises their potential in work and life.
- Will be more likely to invest in skills training
- Will have a greater commitment to learning – will stick with and complete their chosen courses and achieve better results
- Will be more informed and demanding customers, able to drive a demand-led system that is responsive to their needs
- Through use of the MIAP systems will experience excellent and seamless services in education and training through better collection handling and sharing of information between organisations to inform better decisions
- Will potentially be more able to unlock greater investment in and commitment to training from their employer

**Providers**
- Will be more responsive to learner needs and demands
- Experience greater efficiency in their learner identification and registration services and eligibility tests through the use of MIAP systems

**Employers**
- Will see the motivational value of training in their employees and will be willing to train more
- Will be more motivated to offer Apprenticeships through greater awareness of funding available from the state for an apprentice
- MIAP will provide a forum where an individual’s qualifications are already verified which will allow employers to spend less time carrying out this process. This will allow employers to experience greater efficiency in their recruitment thus improving the turnaround on vacant posts and minimising fraudulent qualification claims.

**aacs and Jobcentre Plus**
- Will be able to provide better advice and support to individuals through a shared data source on individual aspirations and achievements
- Through better shared information, again through MIAP, will be able to make improved funding and planning decisions, targeting and tailoring their services to meet the needs of individuals and employers

It is only once Skills Accounts have been rolled out nationally and their full benefits realised that we will be able to effectively measure their success.
34. What sorts of incentives are available to stakeholders and consumers who take part in the trial? Will they have the opportunity to feedback through a formal process? How will this information be utilised? What will they gain?
Stakeholders’ and customers’ input is crucial to the future development of Skills Accounts. They will be asked share their experiences of the trial so that these can be fed back into the evaluation process.

For individuals, they will receive bespoke, personal IAG and financial information in one place; offering them an opportunity to find the information they need to take control of their learning and development.

For learning providers, they have the opportunity to help mould future policy as well as begin to understand the changes and processes that are taking place within the FE sector and what they need to do to adapt and compete in the demand/choice led funding environment we are moving into.

For careers advice services there will be opportunities to embed the necessary business processes and systems that will need to develop to meet the changes ahead. Through trialling aspects of the new aacs, they will also be able to help mould future policy surrounding FE as we move to meet the Leitch Targets.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS
IAG Services – Currently provided by nextstep & learndirect
IES – Integrated Employment & Skills
aacs – Adult Advancement Careers Service
MIAP – Managing Information Across Partners

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