

The future of Skills for Life and related learning in the light of the Leitch review report

St George's House, Windsor, 22 and 23 March 2007

Background paper

This paper sets the context for the ideas-building event on the future of Skills for Life and related learning in the light of the Leitch review report. It is not intended to provide a detailed framework for discussion, but to prompt reflection and ideas during the event itself. The focus of the paper is the scale of the future development of the Skills for Life agenda required to achieve the ambitions of the Leitch review report

Skills for Life: progress to date

Skills for Life has been a big success story for the government, providers and learners themselves. The government's interim target for 2007 of 1.5 million adults with improved literacy and numeracy skills has been achieved. In the last decade this has been taken forward through a comprehensive programme of activity which has included setting stretching targets, bringing coherence to the qualifications framework, further promoting professional standards among the provider workforce, and making use of intermediaries such as trade union learner representatives.

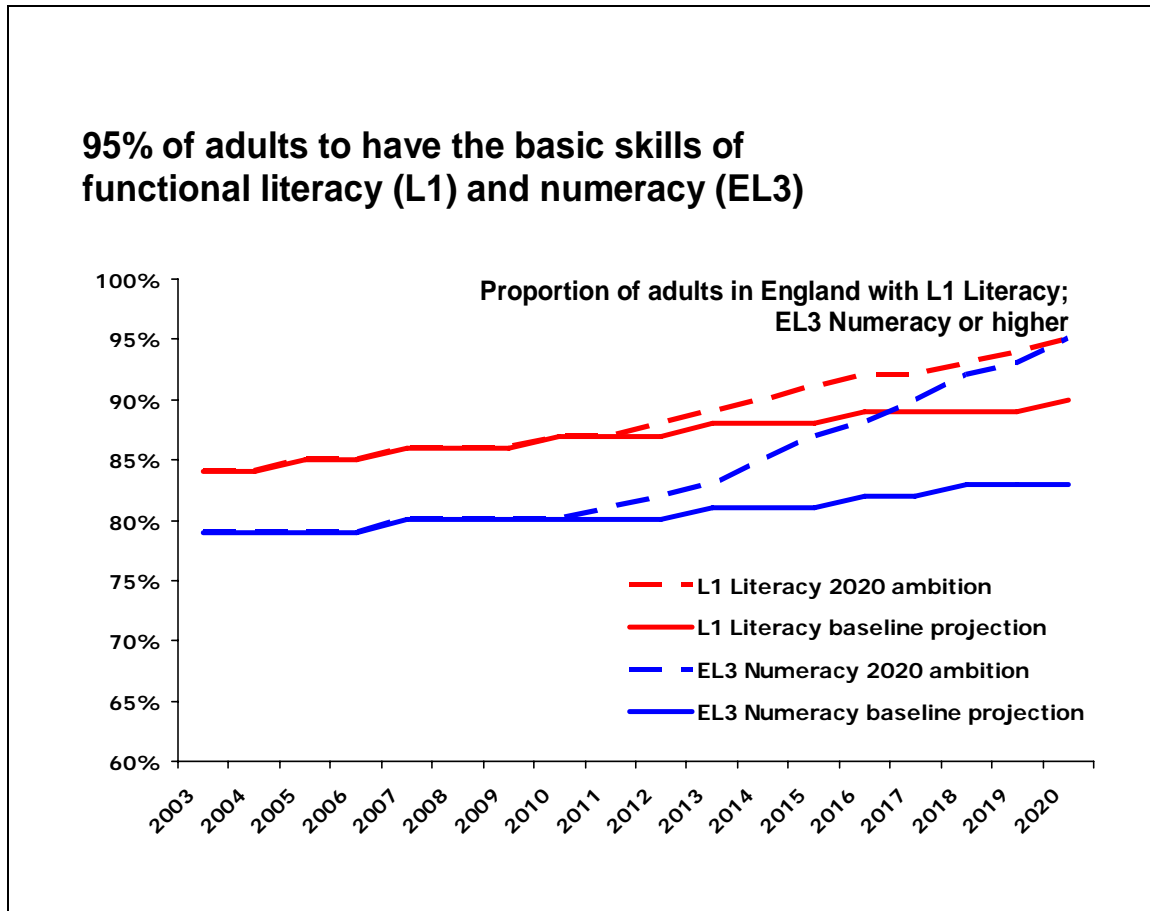
Based on previous performance, prospects for meeting the 2010 target of 2.25 million adults with improved literacy and numeracy are good. However the achievement of the interim target provides a natural opportunity to review options for future development. In addition, we expect that the effort required to reach the 2010 target will need to increase and build on effectiveness to maintain progress. This is given much greater urgency and impact by the publication of the Leitch review report.

The changing context: Leitch review report

Lord Leitch's report *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* published in December 2006 calls for radical change to enable the United Kingdom to become a world leader in skills. Between now and 2010, Leitch calls for a major change in learning and skills provision based on demand. Employers will increasingly be able to access initial funding for skills development directly through an extension of the approach piloted as Train to Gain. They will have a key role, through sector skills councils, in setting the framework of vocational qualifications directly to meet their needs. Learners will access funding and co-funding for vocational learning directly through Learner Accounts. By 2010 these will be the only routes for developing vocational learning, meaning that employer and learner demand together, rather than planning of supply by the Learning and Skills Council, will have the major role in shaping provision.

Leitch also sets very demanding goals to be achieved through this reshaping of the system. His analysis concludes that today's growth path, based on today's skills targets and methods, would only enable the United Kingdom to maintain its current position as a mediocre player in comparison to other developed economies. Leitch makes the case for the UK to become a 'world leader in skills'.

In the Skills for Life context, Leitch writes ‘The current problem is so pressing that current efforts must be more than trebled, so that at least 95 per cent of adults have functional literacy and numeracy skills by 2020, matching the best in the world.’ This adds up to 7.4 million adult attainments by 2020.



Progress towards this goal would be measured every two years. The target for level 2 is 90 per cent, with a further target of 95 per cent to be achieved as soon as possible.

Leitch’s phrase provides a useful pointer for ideas building: ‘The review proposes to more than treble the rate at which basic skills deficits in the adult population are currently being tackled.’

From worklessness to skills

Leitch’s report also calls for the stronger measures to tackle skills needs among workless people. He recommends that all benefit claimants should be screened at the start of their claim, with new benefit claims and work focused interviews becoming the trigger for a basic skills screening. He says that people whose basic skills problems are seen as a barrier to finding a job by Jobcentre Plus personal advisers should be referred to training. Jobcentre Plus personal advisers will also have responsibility for referring claimants to training when they have found work. Leitch also says that there is a strong case for mandatory basic skills training after six months on Job Seekers Allowance.

Basic skills improvements will also be more fully integrated into support such as Pathways to Work for people with health problems and disabilities, and the New Deal for Lone Parents.

Progression routes

The 2003 Skills White Paper established the principle of a safeguarded budget for Personal and Community Development Learning (£153 million in 2006-7) and Family and Neighbourhood Learning (£57 million in 2006-7). The focus of these budgets is leisure, quality of life, and health and well-being. PCDL provision is available to people with a range of different educational backgrounds. However the capacity of PCDL to 'capture' people for learning who would not become involved through other routes is significant. Progression from PCDL to Skills For Life and, beyond that, to development of higher level skills is a progression route to be developed and maintained further to meet the challenge of 'ramping up' presented by Leitch.

This raises the question: can more progression from PCDL to Skills for Life be achieved within the existing framework? Should progression to Skills for Life be identified as an explicit goal in establishing the framework for PCDL through PCDL partnerships?

The challenge for Skills for Life delivery

The shift towards a demand-led system will place new requirements on provision of adult learning, including for Skills for Life learners. In the short to medium term, the new framework of Learner Accounts will focus on Level 3 learning, using the principle of co-funding between individuals, the state and employer where appropriate. However by 2010 Leitch intends that all vocational learning should be funded through Train to Gain and Learner accounts. This opens up scope to build the 'habits of demand' among individuals – enabling them to take ownership of planning and funding their own learning at every stage.

It will also require providers to become more responsive to demand and less dependent on planning. This is likely to offer new challenges in terms of the learning context and types of delivery. In this context there is a challenge, for instance, as to how far e-learning will develop further as a preferred and accessible part of the learning experience.

On the other side of the equation, government and other players in the learning and skill system will be required to focus, for instance, on ensuring a balance of achievement so that numeracy goals are given equal weight to the targets for literacy. Linked to this will be the challenge of increasing the absolute numbers attaining basic skills development while maintaining an focus on the hardest to help groups such as offenders and workless people.

Challenge for employers

Many employers build in Skills for Life to a broader commitment to improve the skills of their workforce. Leitch has launched a new Pledge for all employers to commit voluntarily to train all eligible employees to level 2 in the workplace. This will be reviewed in 2010. If the improvement is not sufficient, a statutory entitlement to

workplace training to level 2 will be introduced in consultation with employers and trade unions.

Embedded learning, which combines the development of literacy, language and numeracy with vocational and other skills, will be a major component in taking this forward. Leitch also provide a major challenge in terms of progression from basic skills to vocational learning at level 2. Trade union learning representatives have a strong track record of ensuring that learning opportunities are made available to those who need them most in the workplace; and this role will be needed more than ever.

Helping shape the agenda

The projected revolution in adult learning and skills takes place in the context of the Department for Education and Skills seeking to play a strategic and enabling role in the national learning and skills system, rather than trying to manage everything from the centre. The success of the first stages of the Skills for Life project signal an appropriate time for the Skills for Life Strategy Unit also to take a strategic stance, supporting those who are actually making things happen within the system.

Given the combination of a more strategic and hands-off role with extremely challenging targets, it will be important to understand how the Unit can play the most effective role in the system, and how it can communicate, influence and support others most effectively.

Opening up the discussion

This short paper aims to open up a number of issues for discussion. Some of the key questions it implies are:

What are the options to increase the pace of progress on Skills for Life?

Can new forms of provision provide the answer?

What are the implication for the workforce and their skills?

What are the implications of the new Leitch thresholds?

How can the demand side deliver and how can basic skills be embedded?

What are the challenges and opportunities for progress from PCDL to Skills for Life and beyond to level 2?

How can we develop an integrated system for those in and out of work?

What can and should we do if the Comprehensive Spending Review results in a lot of new money for Skills for Life? How do we deliver the targets if it does not?

What should we do more of? What can we drop?

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St. George's House Conventions

1. *Please be open to changing your mind*

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

2. *Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event*

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

3. *Please take risks with ideas*

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

4. *Please try and avoid any false consensus*

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

5. *Please use “plain English”*

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

Andrew Carter

Warden of St. George's House