A Review of Sectorial Strategies to Encourage Lifetime Learning

Segal Quince Wicksteed Limited

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*A Research report produced by
Seqal Quince Wicksteed Limited*

A Review of Several Strategies to Encourage Lifetime Learning

Acknowledgements

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1.   Introduction

1.1   The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has supported a number of Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) to encourage lifetime learning amongst employees in their respective sectors. The projects were funded in two rounds following a competitive tendering process. The ITOs which received support covered a range of sectors:

> ● phase one   agriculture
>   hairdressing
>   information technology
>   local government
>   retail
>
> ● phase two   bus and coach
>   hospitality
>   marine engineering
>   plumbing
>   sport and recreation

1.2   An Employee Development Scheme for the glass sector and managed by Glass Training Limited (GTL), the ITO for the sector, was initially funded before this initiative but was latterly treated as effectively part of it because it shared many common features with the lifetime learning projects supported. Segal Quince Wicksteed Limited (SQW) was commissioned in November 1995 to review the effectiveness of the Phase One ITOs and GTL in designing and implementing their strategies[1]. This review was completed in March 1997.

1.3   In January 1997 this remit was extended to three of the Phase Two ITOs (Bus and Coach, Hospitality and Plumbing). The latter ITOs began their projects in the second half of 1996. It was decided to exclude Marine Engineering and Sport and Recreation from the review as it was too early to form any rounded view on their projects.

Methodology

1.4   As part of their original bid for funds each ITO had received DfEE support to appoint an external evaluator to review the project. Where these sector specific evaluations have taken

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[1] In the remainder of this report we used the term Phase One projects to refer to these six initiatives.

place they have reviewed the activities of the ITOs and advised on how the ITO could proceed in the future. SQW's role was to work alongside these other evaluators to draw out the lessons arising *across* the projects as a whole (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: research strategy
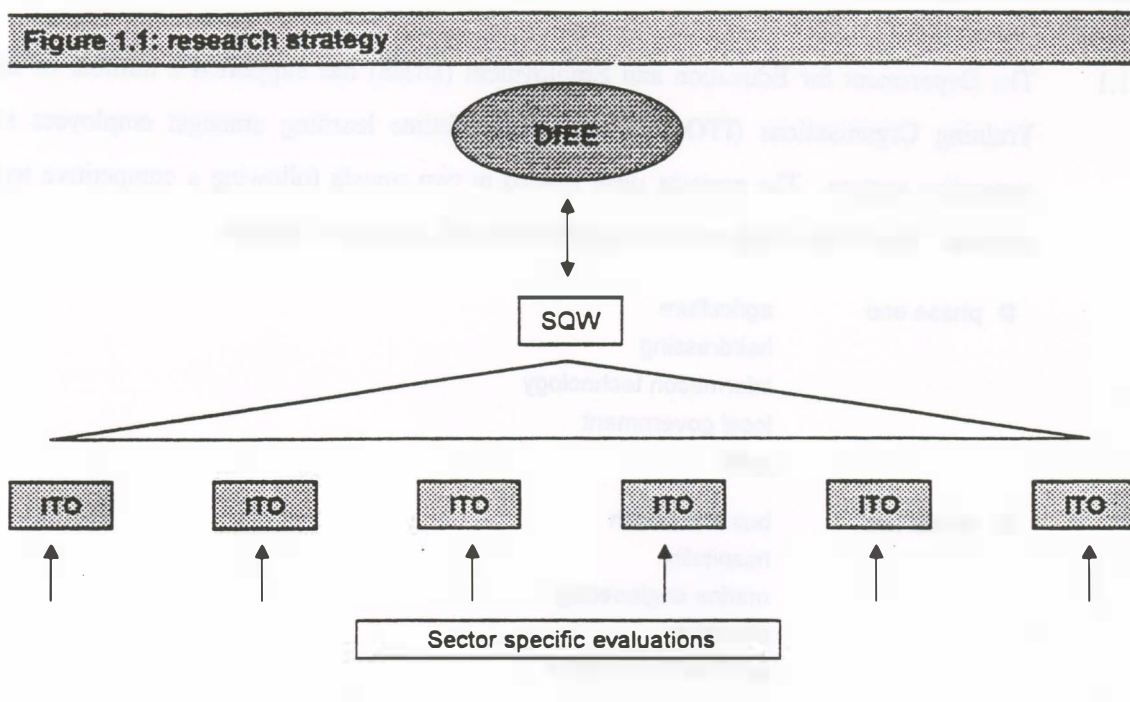
1.5 Due to the varied nature of the projects and the differing roles of the sector evaluators, SQW adopted a flexible approach to the review. We sought to use data collected by the ITOs and their evaluators and to supplement this with additional interviews and surveys. We did not conduct repeat surveys of clients already contacted for evaluation purposes by the ITO or their evaluator. In some cases the scope for additional research was limited as the project had not yet been fully implemented and so there were no end users to survey. Where this occurred and the project was reasonably well advanced we have sought an informed view (for example from training suppliers and employers) about likely future impact.

Report structure

1.6 By March 1997 many of the projects had not fully implemented the strategies they had adopted. However, it is possible to recognise a number of lessons learned by the ITOs in implementing the projects and from these to identify a series of key success criteria for similar future projects. These are set out in Sections Three and Four respectively. These are preceded, in Section Two by a brief description of the sectors and their projects.

2. The sectors and their projects

Introduction

2.1 The review was based around projects which were conducted in nine sectors, led by the ITO for that sector. In this section we provide an introduction to the sectors and their projects.

Agriculture

2.2 The agriculture and horticulture sector contains many very small units, which usually employ two or three people. The units are often geographically dispersed. People entering the sector often have some relevant qualifications, although there was a concern that these were not always sufficient. The nature of work is not readily conducive to continuing learning; with small employing units requiring people to be on-site across many hours of the day.

2.3 The project planned by ATB Landbase contained six strands:

➲ *a series of first access points though which identified agents would link people to training services and advice*

➲ *a training needs analysis system based on national occupational standards*

➲ *guidance material about Scottish/National Vocational Qualifications (S/NVQs)*

➲ *open learning materials for owner/managers seeking qualifications*

➲ *the writing and dissemination of case studies to highlight the benefits of learning*

➲ *a directory of funding support.*

Bus and Coach

2.4 The bus and coach sector is dominated by six large firms which employ 85% of the workforce. Indeed most of the firms in the sector are relatively large and 70% employ over 50 people. It has undergone considerable change in recent years, in particular due to the effects of deregulation. Much of the learning activity was concentrated on smaller sections of the workforce such as managers and engineers while the largest group of employees, the drivers, received little development support. The ITO's research showed that drivers felt stuck in their

positions and were ambivalent about continued learning. The ITO was also concerned that employers were reluctant to invest in good drivers who might be poached by competitors.

2.5   The varied hours worked by bus drivers necessitated that any effort to tackle this problem had to provide a resource which was flexible. The Bus and Coach Training (BCT) ITO sought and received the support of the industry to buy and develop a 'learning bus' which they intend to use to promote learning products and to give advice and guidance on career opportunities.

Hairdressing

2.6   The hairdressing industry comprises many very small employers. Entry level training is well structured across the sector. Many new entrants achieve an S/NVQ Level Two, often supported through national training programmes. However, research conducted for the Hairdressing Training Board (HTB) as a first stage of their project confirmed their concern that beyond this there was little activity. Many owner/managers had received no formal management training.

2.7   HTB believed that the materials and infrastructure existed to meet the need that they perceived. The issue was to convince the sector that it needed to take action. They therefore sought to introduce an awareness raising campaign based around:

➲   *mailshots to salons*

➲   *identifying key people within the sector who would raise the issue in their presentations*

➲   *raising the profile of lifetime learning in HTB written materials*

➲   *a helpline which would direct people to appropriate provision.*

Hospitality

2.8   The hospitality sector is characterised by a large number of relatively poorly paid staff with a high level of turnover (partly as a result of the seasonal nature of the business) and difficulties in filling many vacancies. The Hospitality Training Foundation (HTF) is concerned to address these problems, believing that a more positive image for the industry linked to better career development would improve employee satisfaction, retention and performance. This in turn would improve business performance.

2.9   The project focused on one occupation within the sector: housekeepers. HTF intends to develop open learning materials that will serve anyone who wants to develop their knowledge

up to S/NVQ Level 2. The approach is flexible to take account of the varied hours worked within the sector. It also recognises that not all employers will be supportive and therefore seeks to enable individuals to take part in the initiative without employer support.

Glass

2.10 The sector contains 150 firms which employ approximately 40,000 employees at 1,400 sites nationwide. Training and development activity varied considerably across them, with several already involved in S/NVQs, Modern Apprenticeships and Investors in People. GTL (Glass Training Ltd) sought to increase activity across the sector by developing and supporting a demand for learning.

2.11 In the first instance they were not concerned if this demand was directly vocational. They thought that if an interest in learning could be stimulated then, in time, this would lead to vocationally related activity. This formed a core part of the GTL rationale and project design.

Information Technology

2.12 The use of information technology (IT) is becoming increasingly widespread. This is increasing the range of people who require IT skills to be able to do their job, from IT specialists at one end of the spectrum to those who will use IT as a means to another end. Despite this the up-take of S/NVQs in IT has been less than expected. The Information Technology ITO (ITITO) was concerned that this reflected a lack of knowledge about their products. They therefore sought to set up a web site on the internet which would:

- ⊃ *allow individuals to assess themselves against the VQ standards*
- ⊃ *direct people to appropriate training.*

Local Government

2.13 Local government employs around 10% of the workforce across the UK. Although most authorities are major employers in their own right, by nature of their role they contain a wide range of occupations between which there is often little contact or coherence. The sector has a well established culture of providing staff training but this is usually issue driven rather than part of a wider lifetime learning culture.

2.14   The Local Government Management Board was concerned to understand the position of lifetime learning and attitudes towards it across the sector before undertaking any new activity. They therefore sought and received support from DfEE for a baselining research exercise.

Plumbing

2.15   The plumbing sector is largely comprised of very small employers: 80% of firms employ fewer than five plumbers and there are very few medium or large firms. Most firms are owner managed, although owners commonly lack any formal management training. There is a well established apprenticeship route in to the sector, but little development activity thereafter. The British Plumbing Employers Council (BPEC) sought to develop a project which would provide employees in the sector with an open learning based workbook which would enable them to:

- ➲   *assess their skills*
- ➲   *identify areas of development.*

Retail

2.16   Many large high street stores have developed sophisticated human resource development processes. Smaller retailers, however, have generally not recognised the need for such policies. Many new employees to the sector lack qualifications and there are limited opportunities for them to pursue them within the sector.

2.17   The National Retail Training Council (NTRC) sought to develop and promote open learning material which would highlight to those at lower occupational levels the skills that they had. It was anticipated that this would raise self esteem, reduce staff turnover and improve employee performance. Although the material was aimed at sub-S/NVQ Level One, it was hoped that it would subsequently stimulate some people to pursue S/NVQs.

3. Lessons learned

Introduction

3.1   The lifetime learning strategies were funded as National Development Projects by DfEE. This budget is used when the correct policy response has not yet been fully established. National Development Projects also have the aim of developing the training infrastructure. As such the projects were a means to learn lessons that would help to map out future policy action and to assist in the development of the ITOs. In this section we set out the lessons which have been highlighted by the projects.

Understand the sector

3.2   The policies implemented by the ITOs were based on their understanding of the current situation within their sector. They developed strategies and bid for resources on this basis. However, in several instances it became apparent that a number of the initial assumptions were questionable. For example ATB Landbase found the sector even more apathetic about lifetime learning than had been expected while BCT and GTL uncovered greater enthusiasm.

3.3   Two of the ITOs (those covering hairdressing and local government) undertook baseline market research as part of their strategy development. In the case of HTB their understanding of the issues in the sector was confirmed. The research enabled them to go forward with greater certainty and provided a baseline against which impact can be assessed. LGMB was concerned that their level of awareness about this issue was insufficient to inform a plan of action and that more specific knowledge was needed. Their research will allow future actions to be designed and targeted more appropriately.

3.4   It may not always be necessary to conduct a baseline study. For example a considerable amount of research had already been conducted in the retail sector. This detailed current levels of training and so provides a baseline against which to measure changes in training and development activity.

3.5   Knowledge of the sector, although necessary, is not sufficient to ensure an efficient and successful project. The projects also identified a number of issues relating to implementation.

Project management

3.6   The implementation of the lifetime learning projects was a major task. The projects involved the development of materials and the promotion of these to target groups. However, several of the projects suffered considerable delays against their original timescales. This reflected a number of issues:

> ➲   *other pressures on the time of typically small ITO staff teams. Project staff were diverted to other tasks including (for example HTB) bids for National Training Organisation (NTO) status which became a new, and priority, task after the launch of these projects.*

> ➲   *difficulties in identifying employers who were willing to become involved (for example NRTC).*

3.7   This highlights the difficulties involved in estimating the time and cost involved in planning and implementing large projects. ITITO appear to have managed this process particularly well. With only a small core staff of six and limited appropriate technical knowledge in-house, they took on a management role, and contracted the main workload to a specialist provider.

Partnership

3.8   While ITOs are an important part of the training infrastructure, there are a number of other key players, such as Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Business Links and training suppliers. The involvement of other partners is likely to improve the impact of a project by drawing their knowledge, contacts and resources into the ITO's initiative, particularly for sectors dominated by large numbers of very small operating units, such as farming, plumbing and hairdressing. Most of the project ITOs made little attempt even to contact potential collaborators, and we saw little effort going in to building these first contacts in to longer-term strategic partnerships.

3.9   Some of the ITOs have made explicit approaches to TECs and other intermediaries, although for different reasons:

> ➲   *ATB Landbase sought to promote development activity in the sector by linking employers to local TECs and other intermediaries*

> ➲   *HTB and NRTC sought to make contact with a number of TECs to identify suitable company contacts. In neither case did this work well*

> ➲   *HTB and ITITO having developed a product have sought to market this to TECs, although there has been a generally positive first response this has not yet led to any activity.*

SQW

3.10 GTL recognised that as the level of activity increased and the period for which they had funding approached its end they would need to draw in other organisations to meet the needs of the glass sector. In particular they wanted to identify organisations which might assist companies to fund training. They therefore approached a number of other agents external to the sector (such as TECs and training suppliers) to involve them in taking forward the initiative.

3.11 Only in one case (retail), however, was there TEC involvement in the project Steering Group (which tended to comprise larger employers and trade associations). This indicates that there was little wider involvement in the actual design of the projects. Unfortunately, the TEC which did sit on the retail project's Steering Group had serious reservations about the overall ethos of the project. It was concerned that the learning material was not related to S/NVQ standards. This could be seen to reflect a narrow view of lifetime learning, but also highlights that partnerships need to be carefully constructed.

Generating employer and employee involvement

3.12 Several of the projects (for example those in the plumbing and retail sectors) were explicitly targeted at employees rather than employers. However, the ITOs became aware that their contacts in the sector were with employers and that they had to go through these to reach the employees. This was a potential problem as some employers were concerned that if their employees pursued learning then they might seek a better job than they currently held and so the employer would lose an employee. Most of the ITOs recognised that their strategic aim of reaching individuals had to be achieved, tactically, through employers, but not all succeeded in overcoming the reservations which many employers have about an individual-focused initiative.

3.13 It is also important for ITOs to have, or to build, good contacts and relationships to help to generate demand for lifetime learning. The project in the glass sector (and another similar area based lifetime learning initiative in Scotland, led by the Scottish Association of Master Bakers) achieved this through:

- *initially working with companies with whom they already had contact*
- *using face-to-face-meetings to get agreements of involvement*
- *targeting their efforts on a relatively small number of companies.*

3.14   Several of the other ITOs studied used more general marketing methods such as mailshots and articles in the trade press. These appear to have been less successful. NRTC and ITITO faced particular problems in this respect. NRTC's main contacts are with larger firms which had already developed sophisticated staff development policies. Their target group was smaller employers with which they had less contact and who were more sceptical of the concept. NRTC sensibly sought to tackle this by targeting their effort on a small number of employers, but they were making new contacts with those employers rather than building on existing relationships. This became a serious problem for the project as the employers were reluctant to become involved. One possible solution identified by NRTC was that they could have asked a few employers who might use the product to be involved in its design, therefore enlisting their commitment from an earlier stage.

3.15   The product developed by ITITO was not aimed at its members, but was cross-sectoral. They aimed to draw in users of IT across all sectors - a potential market of several million people. This meant that, unlike the projects targeted at ITOs' members, ITITO had no existing relationship on which to build. This created difficulties in stimulating demand for the product developed.

4. Success criteria

Introduction

4.1 The lessons identified in the previous section point to a number of criteria which are necessary to ensure the successful development and implementation future projects. These are set out below. Of themselves none of these factors will ensure that projects are successful. However, together they should increase the probability of correctly defining a project which will then meet its objectives.

Understanding the sector

4.2 When developing strategies the ITOs are required to make a number of judgements about their sector. These require to be well-founded to ensure that the correct level of resources is used and that these resources are targeted at the most important issues. This understanding should not simply involve a statistical analysis of the sector, but should also include the attitudes which have led to the current situation and the issues faced.

Resources

4.3 The implementation of such projects can require a substantial resource commitment from the ITO. The staff resources of the ITO can be supplemented by the involvement of external advisers. However, there will still remain a requirement on the ITO, at the very least, to devote staff time to project management. ITOs must therefore cost proposals in a way that allows them to free up the necessary staff time to deliver the project as set out in their proposal. This resource must be protected from other pressures which subsequently impact on the ITO.

Build on existing activity and contacts

4.4 Lifetime learning is a new concept to many people. Understandably there is some reluctance to embrace the concept, perhaps fed by a lack of understanding. There is a greater likelihood of people being persuaded by face-to-face discussion than through a mailshot. This was demonstrated by the relative success of the project in the glass sector compared to, for example, the difficulties faced in the retail sector in generating employer involvement.

4.5   This type of approach also has implications for the scale of the project planned. Face-to-face meetings are more time consuming and costly than mailshots. Therefore, for a fixed level of resources, they imply focusing effort on a smaller range of employers and looking for ways of building out from an initial bridgehead. This may well involve linking a long-term lifetime learning strategy to a series of passing initiatives and opportunities. However, if this generates greater success then it can boost the credibility of the approach and so ease the task in persuading others to become involved at a later stage.

4.6   The project in the glass sector grew out of earlier initiatives by the ITO to build relationships and stimulate activity. This meant that from the start the project was able to utilise the momentum which already existed, it did not need to be created. It also gave GTL credibility with its target audience which provides a better basis for the ITO to persuade people in the sector of the need for action.

Partnership

4.7   ITOs are generally not large organisations, and so must make maximum use of the resources (not just money) which they can lever in from others. There are other agencies (such as TECs and training organisations) which they could usefully tap into for expertise and support. Key employers who are the target for the activity should be viewed in the same way. It can be difficult to bring partners on board once a project has begun. They may, for example, have different objectives which can create a negative tension within the project. It may therefore be better if ITOs identify (and ideally involve) suitable partners at the development stage, giving the others a chance to influence the design of the project. This in turn should:

- *improve the robustness of the planned activity*
- *increase the commitment of the partners as they can see that their objectives being addressed.*

Projects must focus on supply and demand

4.8   Many of the above criteria have focused on involving employers and employees who ultimately will be the demand side of the lifetime learning market. The projects reviewed were often focused on the development of materials. However, the provision of materials will not change the levels of lifetime leaning activity if they are not used. Therefore, it is vital that future projects not only address the barriers to progress, but also take steps to convince others that these issues must be faced. This in turn will stimulate demand and so lead to the change in activity levels which underpins this intervention.

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