

# Developing the University for Industry Concept: An Evaluation of ADAPT Round 3 Projects

Jim Hillage, John Atkinson, John Barry, Sara Dewson,  
Mark Stevens, Ken Walsh, Polly Kettley

Institute for Employment Studies

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# Contents

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<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Aims of the study	1
1.2 Our approach	2
1.3 Outline of this report	9
<b>2. Outcomes</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Immediate beneficiaries	11
2.2 Tangible additions to learning infrastructure	15
2.3 Capacity building	16
2.4 Experience gained (how-to outcomes)	17
2.5 Longer term outcomes	18
2.6 Additionality	19
<b>3. Processes</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Project and partnership management	21
3.2 ADAPT procedures	26
3.3 Evaluation	29
3.4 Dissemination	30
<b>4. Implications for Ufi</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1 Four main themes	31
4.2 Specific benefits for Ufi	35
4.3 Wider benefits	36
4.4 Learning the lessons	36
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	<b>39</b>
5.1 Have the projects contributed to the development of Ufi?	39
5.2 What has influenced the impact the projects have made, and how might this have been better ?	40



# Executive Summary

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This report presents final case studies of ten ADAPT-Ufi development projects, selected to present a variety of different kinds of project funded in the UK under the third round of ADAPT.

Individual findings are reported in the case studies.

Most projects had put more (sometimes significantly more) effort into the design, development and implementation of learning tools than into their use in actually delivering learning. Thus, although substantial, and usually sufficient, the number of immediate beneficiaries actually engaged had often been less, sometimes significantly so, than envisaged in projects' original proposals.

There are a number of purely contingent reasons for this, deriving from the complex and perhaps restrictive rules and procedures associated with the original ADAPT framework. However, more endemic problems encountered included

- Difficulties engaging non-learners.
- Poor ICT capability among the target groups.
- Over-reliance on college-based staff for recruiting.
- Difficulties engaging SMEs' interest/commitment, and,
- Tightening labour markets.

By contrast, these projects had developed a set of physical and tangible additions to the learning infrastructure, many of which will have a productive life long after these projects have closed, representing a formidable and valuable range of learning aids.

Capacity building had been an important output too, and many of the partnerships formed and tested within these projects seem likely to survive. Most of the partnerships were in better shape on finishing the project than they were on entering it.

Less tangible, but nevertheless important, outcomes perceived by these projects related simply to the experience they felt they had gained in how to achieve their various ends. Such experiences were both internal (about how they might have operated more smartly) and external (with generic relevance in the wider

learning milieu). Projects were concerned about the lack of any formal means of formulating and passing on such lessons to Ufi.

Although many of these projects would probably have happened in some form or another, without ADAPT funding, what this funding opportunity did for most of them, was to bring forward the work in time, and allow the ideas to be developed on a larger scale, and implemented more professionally, than would otherwise have been the case.

Projects that were progressed best were those with:

- a combination of strong intellectual and administrative leadership at the centre
- sound formal project management procedures, including good intra-project communications
- a solid, often ready established, partnership in which each member had:
  - a clear role and is geared up to be involved at the right time in the project plan
  - a commitment and interest in the project goals at all levels of their organisation, and
  - the capacity and interest to extend their involvement if required beyond their contractual obligations
- the capacity to respond constructively to developing circumstances.

Federal partnerships seem to have been particularly prone to partnership problems, particularly where different partners, each with different and fairly independent bits of the project, simply wanted to go their own way, or, dropped out altogether.

We identified four features of the ADAPT origins which seem to us to have been particularly problematic for these projects

- the narrow ADAPT beneficiary targets
- complex and opaque regulations which hindered project flexibility
- an over-emphasis on the need to work with and through SMEs
- time and effort-consuming administrative arrangements, particularly concerning funding.

Project evaluations had generally reported fairly late in the day, and had been almost exclusively been *post-hoc* evaluations, with little evidence that they have influenced the course of the projects during their lifetimes.

Most projects had sought to disseminate to their immediate constituency (of like projects, similar institutions, and similar

markets), but few had published significantly beyond it. The more serious and well-managed the project, the better and more substantial had the dissemination been.

Four important meta-themes stand out from our findings as having important implications for Ufi.

- All the projects, to a lesser and generally to a greater extent, encountered a range of problems in using ICT as a platform for learning. A common difficulty was the worse-than-expected capacity within the target community to embrace on-line learning, and the common lesson was the importance of correctly assessing extent to which the projects were able to lead their prime clientele without getting too far ahead as to be over the horizon and loose touch altogether.
- Driving the demand for learning involved important promotional considerations as well as overcoming learning-barriers
  - promotional lessons included the need to ensure that promotional messages are concerted and are given over a long period of time and on a number of levels. Projects also generally found it more effective to target any promotional effort directly at the target audience, than through widespread mass marketing
  - perhaps one of the most striking lessons to come out of the projects is the importance of personal support to learners, particularly those most distant from a learning culture.
- We observed at least two important implications for the general structure of learning provision
  - the provision of 'bite-sized' segments of learning presented difficult issues for the way qualifications are accredited
  - most projects demonstrated the importance of providing human support to learners, *ie* people who could help others become engaged in and maximise the benefit from learning.
- Another theme underlying a number of the projects was about the importance of linking across policy initiatives and building synergy between them.

We observed a slowly improving dialogue between these projects and Ufi during their lifetimes, and found that a positive relationship had significant effects on the commitment of partners and the general tenor of the projects. Nevertheless, despite an apparent effort from the Ufi centre halfway through our evaluation to re-energise the cluster groups, a number of projects still held the view at the end of their time that they were ineffective.



# 1. Introduction

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The University for Industry (now referred to as Ufi) was the original title for a major policy initiative taken by the last Government to stimulate demand for lifelong learning and improve access to high quality and innovative learning opportunities particularly through the use of information and communication technologies. Ufi is a public-private partnership in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which aims to put individuals in a better position to get jobs, improve their career prospects and boost business competitiveness. Ufi Ltd is a private company charged with delivering the policy.

Ufi's learning services are being delivered through **learndirect**, which provides access to innovative and high quality courses, over 80 per cent of them on-line. **learndirect** was launched in the Autumn of 2000.

This study was designed to inform the development of the Ufi/**learndirect** initiative through evaluating the interaction between a series of development projects, sponsored under the EU's ADAPT programme, and the Ufi policy development and implementation team.

In 1998, the third call for project ideas under the EU's ADAPT social funding programme was made in the UK. The third round was focused on projects which both met the ADAPT aims of helping individuals adapt to industrial change and which would also trial or explore ideas and issues of relevance to the Ufi. Well over 100 projects were funded under third round of ADAPT.

## 1.1 Aims of the study

The overall aim of the evaluation is to evaluate and identify the implications for Ufi of the ADAPT development projects. The specific objectives of the study, outlined by the DfES, were to:

- investigate issues around the projects' processes. Within this objective we wanted to look in particular at
  - the origins of the projects
  - the projects' own aims and objectives

- their labour market basis and justification
- the extent to which they showed additionality and innovation
- the effectiveness of different arrangements to secure delivery
- investigate the experiences of beneficiaries and the staff in delivering the project. Within this second broad objective we wanted to look in particular at
  - the participation of beneficiary groups
  - different approaches to marketing
  - the use of technology
  - roles and relationships within the projects
  - any constraints or problems.
- investigate the end-products of the development projects. Within this third objective we wanted to look in particular at
  - direct and intermediate beneficiaries
  - infrastructural outputs
  - positional outputs.

Underpinning these specific objectives was an interest in the interaction between the development of the Ufi policy nationally and the particular development projects. We therefore approached our projects from a Ufi, rather than an ADAPT, perspective and, for instance, were more interested in how they are succeeding, or are constrained, in fulfilling Ufi rather than ADAPT objectives.

The research approach was designed to reflect the three sets of research objectives covering the initial genesis of the project, their ongoing development and their eventual outputs and impact.

## **1.2 Our approach**

The evaluation is based on case studies of ten ADAPT Round 3 development projects.

### **1.2.1 Case study selection**

At the outset, it was agreed that we were interested in the more Ufi oriented projects, rather than those which were primarily focused on traditional ADAPT objectives. The then list of about 110 projects funded under the ADAPT initiative were whittled down to a long list of potential case studies in discussion with members of the Ufi Transition Team and the ADAPT Support

Unit at ECOTEC<sup>1,2</sup>. From this long list, a short list was drawn up on the basis of the following criteria:

- *project content* – the aim was to obtain a broad coverage of the issues addressed by the development projects. To ensure this we used the ‘cluster analysis’ conducted by ECOTEC as a basis to distinguish between say whether the project was primarily focused on say providing new forms of learner support, or a call centre, or basic skills
- *size* – to ensure we had both large and small projects we looked at the size of their budget and in particular whether they had over or under £1 million in ESF support
- *region* – the aim was to cover most of Great Britain, including Scotland and Wales and also to include projects based in both rural and urban areas. However, some of the projects were national and/or sector based, and therefore geography (and in particular the location of the sponsoring organisation) was not necessarily a useful determining factor
- *sector* – Ufi had identified four priority industrial sectors: automotive; multimedia; environmental technology and distributive and retail trades. The aim was to include projects targeting most if not all of these sectors.

In addition there were some more qualitative criteria applied to the selection process to ensure a broad mix of projects (*eg* to include single issue and multiple issue projects). Using these criteria we selected ten projects and approached them to take part in the evaluation as case studies. All agreed to participate. It is important to recognise that while these projects are a broad and deliberately constructed cross-section of the ADAPT Round 3 development projects, they were deliberately chosen in part because of their relevance to the Ufi concept. They are not necessarily representative of them as a whole. In drawing any conclusions from the cases the nature of the sample should be taken into account.

### **1.2.2 The case studies**

The case studies are:

- *The Black Country Ufi Pilot* project – sponsored by Wolverhampton University

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<sup>1</sup> The Unit exists to provide advice and support to ADAPT projects and is responsible for sorting out contractual arrangements *etc.*. The Unit is operated by ECOTEC – a West Midlands based research consultancy – under contract to the DfES.

<sup>2</sup> Subsequently further projects were funded through ADAPT, but these projects were not included in the case study selection exercise.

- A project looking at *the Development of Common Standards for Learning Objects* – led by Edexcel
- *East Lancashire Learning Opportunities* – hosted by ELTEC
- *The Learning Connection* – based in the South West
- *Learning North East* – which builds on the original Sunderland-based Ufi pilot project
- *NetGAIN-Learning* – a project hosted by METIER, the arts and media National Training Organisation
- *Scottish Learning Network* - sponsored Scottish Enterprise
- *Skillsbuild* – a Basic Skills Agency led project
- TUC's *Learning Services* project
- A project looking to develop a *Resource Locator* for Wales Digital College.

The projects are separately reported in the case study volume of this report.

### **1.2.3 Three stages of the research**

The evaluation was divided into three phases, in early 1999, in late 1999, and finally, after a postponement (see below) in early 2001.

While in one sense the three phases produced a cumulative understanding of how these projects were progressing, they nevertheless have somewhat different issues at their centres. Below we describe the distinct aims of each phase, and summarise the findings of the first two.

#### **The first stage**

The first stage of the evaluation was essentially a baseline study of the projects. The interviews took place between April and June 1999 and a report was finalised in August 1999. Phase one concentrated around the issues associated with the project set-up and the relationship between the projects and the emerging Ufi policy nationally.

We observed that the ten case studies represented a range of interesting projects, all having the potential to contribute to how the Ufi concept would work, *eg* in terms of developing:

- on-line enrolment via telephone or Internet and access to guidance
- easily accessible databases of learning provision
- new forms of learner support – including on-line tutor support

- the notion of Individual Learner Accounts as a means of engaging non-learners
- new ICT standards for distance and open learning materials
- new, or pulling together existing, learning content (*eg* in the area of basic skills)
- new forms of compiling learning packages – allowing for self-selection of materials.

However, we (and they) feared that their contribution to the development of the Ufi concept might be limited to a degree by the influence of the ADAPT rules, under which the projects were funded. For instance, the ADAPT emphasis on targeting beneficiaries under threat of redundancy does not necessarily match the Ufi focus on mass marketing. The rules also influenced projects to have a greater focus on small and medium-sized businesses than they would otherwise have done and introduced a transnational element to the project. This was often ‘bolted on’ to meet the criteria rather than forming a central element of the project. While these emphases might have been helpful in aligning projects more closely with, for example, public priorities on encouraging more training in SMEs, they sometimes fitted less well with the intrinsic and underlying logic of some of the projects, and so introduced some strains and tensions into projects which did not always help in terms of project delivery or organisation.

Projects had a mix of origins. Some were born out of a *bottom up* consultation exercise, which canvassed for ideas from a range of organisations within a locality or sector. By contrast, some projects had developed their ideas through a more *top down* analysis of need which identified a gap in provision or delivery. Finally some projects were effectively taking forward ideas which originated under previous ADAPT-type initiatives and the latest round of funding allowed for a significant, though fundamentally *incremental*, addition.

Most of the projects had experienced a delay in starting partly due to problems reconciling their Ufi aims with the ADAPT rules and also due to getting the necessary project management procedures and staffing in place and agreeing the roles and responsibilities of the various partners involved.

While at that time it was too early to form any definitive judgements on the overall additionality provided by the projects, most projects felt that the funding had allowed them to do things sooner or to a greater extent than would otherwise have been the case, rather than something totally new.

Projects seem to have been built on one of three forms of partnership. In some cases there was what could be seen as a *federal* partnership, where a number of discrete activities were the

responsibilities of separate partners. At the other extreme, there were *linear* partnerships where the responsibilities were far more sequential and the tasks of one dependent on the other. Finally some of the partnerships had a more *mutual* structure with all varying degrees of responsibility for design, development and delivery. Each structure had different implications for project management.

In all cases, effective project management procedures appeared to have been established, although only limited attention had so far been placed on evaluation. Projects seemed to have a firmer footing where they had an exclusive manager, rather than where the project was one of a number of responsibilities of the manager and/or where they were thoroughly integrated within the host organisation's normal management structure and processes.

Communication with Ufi Ltd and between themselves was a big issue for most of the projects. The need appeared to be threefold:

- to feed through results emerging from the projects into the national policy development process – the 'what works' agenda
- to facilitate learning between projects – the 'reinventing the wheel' agenda
- to provide a channel for Ufi Ltd to share the development of the national policy with key advocates and partners at local level – the 'what's going on' agenda.

'Cluster groups' had been established to facilitate contact between similar projects and Ufi Ltd. However, at this early stage, our case studies had mixed experiences of their effectiveness and most felt that they had not worked well. We felt that while some of the communications difficulties may resolve themselves as Ufi Ltd became established and policy decisions were made, there did nevertheless seem scope for better communications between the projects and Ufi Ltd. This seemed necessary to ensure that the potential of the development projects would be fully realised, national policy benefits from the lessons learnt and the enthusiasm of the project partners maintained.

## **The second stage**

The second stage of the evaluation, started in November 1999 and the fieldwork finished in January 2000.

Our intention was to focus on project delivery. However, in some ways there was insufficient elapsed time between the first and second round of interviews for content of this stage of the evaluation to change substantively from the last. Given the late start of many of the projects and other difficulties they have encountered, many were well behind schedule. Some were still at

the planning and early piloting stage, although others were more advanced. The issues we encountered were therefore a mixture, with some of the points around starting up that were prevalent last time still to the fore, along side a collection of new delivery and project management issues that were beginning to emerge.

All of the projects were to a greater or lesser extent behind schedule either in terms of time (between two and 11 months) or numbers of beneficiaries involved or both. As a result of the delays and other problems some of the projects had been scaled down, but none significantly. Two had taken and a third had been offered, six month extensions. The reasons for the delays varied:

- some still faced problems getting going and staffing up, with contractual issues identified in the first report still prominent in a couple of cases
- some faced problems with their design and had to reconfigure what they were trying to achieve, particularly in regard to their involvement with small and medium sized enterprises
- some faced severe technical issues particularly in developing on-line learning materials and databases.

At the other end of the scale a few had been able to expand what they are doing through the injection of new partners and/or additional sources of funding.

A range of factors affected the progress of the projects. Many were internal, in addition to those relating to the actual design of the project there were those concerning the way the project has been structured and managed. Projects that were progressing best appear to be those with:

- strong intellectual and administrative leadership at the centre
- good intra-project communications
- a solid partnership in which each member had:
  - a clear role and is geared up to be involved at the right time in the project plan
  - a commitment and interest in the project goals at all levels of their organisation, and
  - the capacity and interest to extend their involvement if required beyond their contractual obligations.

We tentatively concluded, at this interim stage, that the more effective ones appeared to be those with a narrower focus and, often, but not exclusively, a linear partnership. In these cases, the project goal was more sharply in focus, roles and contributions were clearer and the project appeared simpler to manage.

There were some important external factors also affecting the projects, not least:

- the continuing impact of the ADAPT rules under which the projects were conceived and operated, which in particular affected:
  - the targeting of the project (and for example their ability to test mass marketing techniques)
  - the flexibility projects had to adapt to changing circumstances
  - the administrative overhead - required to adhere to ADAPT rules
  - project cashflow – as funds took time to flow through the system to projects and onto partnerships
- the emerging Ufi infrastructure and policy was sending explicit and implicit signals to the projects which they interpreted into whether they felt on an inside or outside track. The impact on project progress, as opposed to the relationship between the projects and the centre, was not clear as those with mixed or no (as opposed to positive or negative) signals appear to be among the projects making least significant progress at this interim stage.

We also looked at other aspects of the projects and the way they were managed. In particular we noted that:

- relatively little attention had been given so far to formative evaluation of the projects, which might limit the potential of the projects to generate lessons for the overall Ufi policy and for the project partners to learn from their own experiences
- the transnational elements of the projects, although still largely peripheral, appeared to be generating more value than originally envisaged.

Despite the fact that it was fairly early days in the life of many of these projects, they were still generating a number of potentially useful lessons for Ufi and other policy developments. These included:

- use of information and communication technologies such as:
  - it took longer than expected to develop new systems
  - training providers knew less than expected about ICT
  - on-line learning was not all it is cracked up to be – yet
  - balancing style and functionality in web design could be difficult
  - keeping on-line systems up-to-date could be difficult but was important
- the importance of providing support to learners – in accessing learning opportunities and learning from them

- clarifying issues of intellectual property rights and ownership of learning materials and information, and
- the difficulties in estimating demand for new learning provision and responses to marketing initiatives particularly among those designated as ‘non-learners’.

### Stage three

The study was due to finish at the end of 2000 and the final phase was to concentrate on project outcomes, *ie* what has changed as a result of the project and the main factors which have influenced those results (both positively and negatively). The fieldwork for this stage was programmed for Autumn 2000.

However, in view of the late-running of many of the projects, it was agreed with DfES to postpone the third stage of the research for six months, until March/April 2001. This report sets out our findings from that third wave.

In terms of the research process this time around, we re-interviewed some of those we spoke to in the first stage and some additional project personnel and representatives of key partners where relevant, and in particular we held discussions with project evaluators, many of whom were not in place last time around. We also interviewed people involved in managing the operation of the Cluster Groups. We had fewer discussions with project beneficiaries than originally planned (*ie* people who participate in the active elements of a project), due to the actual nature and position of many of the projects.

## 1.3 Outline of this report

We have summarised above the main findings of the first two waves of research. The substantive report which follows is divided into two parts.

The next four Chapters summarise the main findings and lessons which we can now draw from the case studies as their work under these auspices comes to an end.

- Chapter 2 concentrates on what the projects have delivered from immediate outputs to longer-term outcomes *etc.*
- Chapter 3 looks at the project processes and procedures behind the delivery and examines the factors lying behind their successes and failures
- Chapter 4 draws together the implications of the projects for Ufi/**learn**direct and identifies the main messages to emerge and discusses the way these have or have not been communicated

- Chapter 5 presents the conclusions of the study where we draw together the evidence on the potential and actual contribution made by the projects to the development of the Ufi policy, the factors affecting that contribution and the implications for policy development in the future.

In the second part of the report we set out ten comprehensive case studies, giving more detail of each of the projects in terms of their origins, aims, activities, management procedures, evaluation outcomes, relationship with Ufi and the main learning points to emerge.

## 2. Outcomes

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This chapter considers the outcomes generated by the projects. It begins with the direct outcomes in terms of the immediate beneficiaries who took part in or benefited from the project, and then turns to the indirect outcomes. This second and more substantial discussion begins with the most immediate and tangible outcomes, moving through to look at both longer term outcomes and less palpable ones, which may nevertheless be influential. Finally it considers the additionality of these outcomes, asking how likely would they have been in the absence of the ADAPT/Ufi initiative, or how different.

### 2.1 Immediate beneficiaries

These projects varied considerably in the planned scale of ultimate beneficiaries (by which we mean individual learners and corporate, SME clients). Some had always planned to draw in large numbers, and for these projects large scale provision of learning opportunities had always been the dominant aim of the initiative. For others though, the direct participation of beneficiaries had simply been a means to an end; they had seemingly always envisaged learner throughput as little more than a means of field-testing the learning systems whose design and production had been the main concern of the project.

#### 2.1.1 Fewer than originally planned

Whatever level of direct beneficiary engagement they had initially planned, we generally found that the number of beneficiaries actually engaged had been less, sometimes significantly so, than had been proposed in their original proposals. Thus, for example, the Scottish Learning Network, which had planned a large scale throughput of both individuals and companies estimated that by June 2001 it would have secured between 3,000 and 3,500 of the 5,000 originally planned. On a smaller scale, the Skillsbuild project had dealt with 450 individual clients out of the 600 initially sought. This undershoot was not invariably the case; for example, Learning North East's target of 6,200 SME learners had been reached some nine months before the end of the project, although even here, the project had revised downwards the volume of 'mass market' beneficiaries which it hoped to deal with.

However, looking beyond the obvious inter-project variations, the emerging general picture is one of substantial, and probably sufficient, numbers of clients engaged, albeit fewer than planned. Thus, where projects sought to draw in large numbers, as an end in itself, they had generally done so; where they had seen individual beneficiaries more as test cases for their approach to learning delivery, they had generally got enough to do so.

### 2.1.2 Reasons for the shortfall

There are several factors at work to explain this widespread undershoot.

Firstly, we can observe three purely contingent factors

- **Over-budgeting** – In a fiercely competitive programme such as ADAPT, where the volume of immediate beneficiaries was an important selection criterion, it is quite possible that at the submission stage projects over-estimated, or perhaps over-egged, the number of beneficiaries with whom they expected to deal. It would certainly be irrational to under-estimate them in any submission, and it seems likely that projects had tended to err on the high side. *There may be lessons here for the initial project selection process.*
- **Late running** – More importantly, as we discovered previously in this research, most projects had run late. Although several had tried to catch up with a last minute push, and others had sought six month extensions, the time available to secure the volume targets of beneficiaries envisaged in their original plans, had generally been squeezed as a result. This raises an issue about whether three years is too short a period to contain satisfactory development and implementation phases, given the length of time it took these projects simply to establish themselves, get staff, premises and kit in place, and begin their operations. *There may be lessons here for the way development projects are designed and about the extent they can feed into simultaneous policy development and implementation.*
- **Counting difficulties** – As we have discussed in our earlier reports, all of the projects had faced difficulties reconciling the narrow ADAPT definition of beneficiaries (*ie* SME-related, and unemployed or under threat of redundancy) with the wider ones envisaged by Ufi. We have also shown how ASU generally took a relatively liberal and sympathetic line about the definition of eligible beneficiaries. However, when push came to shove, *ie* when that eligibility was tested through a financial claim on the ADAPT funds, then several projects found that things were not quite so liberal as they had been expecting. It was difficult for us to unpick complaints about rather elaborate bureaucratic procedures in *showing* that beneficiaries were eligible, and related ones about the precise

criteria *informing* eligibility. But whatever the exact mix of these two considerations, some projects found themselves having to incur costs to get beneficiaries into the project, without the certainty that these costs would qualify for support from ADAPT. This certainly seemed to have led two projects at least to hold back on any commitment to recruit to their projects as actively as they might. *While the detailed lessons here may best relate to the particular design of ADAPT or other similar initiatives, the general point is that funding restrictions can limit the potential of projects designed to meet one set of objectives to feed into a policy designed to meet another.*

These factors may have been important in this programme, but they seem to us to be essentially contingent; they derive from the somewhat mixed circumstances surrounding this wave of ADAPT projects, and from the (perhaps over-bureaucratic) rules and procedures associated with it. There is no reason to suppose that they are inherent factors, which need necessarily constrain volumes of beneficiaries under a different regulatory framework.

However, we also recognised some reasons which seem to us to be precisely that; *ie* they are likely to be factors which could constrain participation under practically any circumstances, and so may have a wider resonance for Ufi development. We identified five such factors:

- **Difficulties engaging non-learners** – several projects explicitly said that they had found it harder to recruit learners, both individuals and SMEs, than they had originally anticipated. Although the next three factors mentioned below provide some insights into likely reasons for this, it is important to note that this under-estimation was a reasonably widespread and non-specific feeling, *ie* it was not generally associated with any specific causal factor, it was just simply and frequently harder to get beneficiaries involved in learning than these projects had anticipated that it would be. This does not seem to us to reflect naiveté on the part of the project managers and staff, as they were mainly very experienced, albeit in a wide range of learning environments.
- **Poor ICT capability among the target group** – One fairly widespread reason given for this harder-than-expected recruitment problem was that the target groups of beneficiaries proved to be less easily drawn in to ICT based initiatives than had been expected. Several reasons for this difficulty were observed. Some projects encountered lower-than-expected accessibility of learners to appropriate ICT resources in their homes, workplaces and learning environments. Others experienced a worse-than-expected incidence of purely technical problems with ICT equipment, while several reported a slower-than-expected familiarisation and ‘comfortablistation’ among learners in using it.

- **Colleges may not be the best recruiters** – A third, though less widespread, reason given was that some projects had tended to rely too much on ‘old style FE, college-based personnel’ to promote their offer. This had not proved very successful in marketing opportunities to people who had been traditionally antipathetic to learning, or to those who might have been attracted to ICT as a medium. The more successful projects seemed to have used a mix of methods, incorporating traditional approaches, but supplementing them with ICT and telephone based methods, and using intermediary organisations to get through to hard-to-reach groups.
- **SMEs need sophisticated approaches** – Several projects were dubious about the ADAPT-inspired efforts to get at learners through SMEs. They felt that using one group (SME managers) who were not self-evidently learning enthusiasts to reach another (their employees) who were often equally cool, had not proved to be the most effective course. Certainly *some* SMEs could be found who, by virtue of individual inclination or corporate circumstance, were eager to seize the opportunities which the project offered them, but they tended to be in a minority. As one project manager put it ‘*if I was looking for numbers, this wouldn’t be my first point of departure*’. Others stressed the superior marketing strategies of a sectoral approach, or a local one. None felt that the direct and unmediated SME angle had proved a very sensible or productive approach.
- **Tightening labour market** – Other projects had faced problems recruiting learners who were ‘unemployed, or under threat of redundancy’ simply on account of extremely buoyant local labour market circumstances. Even in those areas facing more difficult labour markets, they still tended to be better than the project planners had envisaged in 1997 when writing their bids.

We have focused on these lower-than-expected beneficiary outcomes because we feel that there may be lessons for Ufi in a closer understanding of why they seem to have occurred for example in terms of:

- *importance of not under-estimating the task of stimulating the demand for learning among those not traditionally involved, nor of over-estimating their ICT capability.*

We reiterate though that most of the projects still secured substantial throughputs of beneficiaries of precisely the kind of people at whom they were aiming. Not all had aimed at mass throughput, and in general the projects had achieved significant, if not the anticipated, volumes of clients making use of their provision.

Furthermore, we should note that few of these projects planned simply to stop this year when ADAPT funding ran out. Most had

plans for securing alternate funding to continue their work in some form or another. Thus, it may be that their 'tally' of direct beneficiaries will continue to rise in the future, as this longer term flow makes itself felt.

## 2.2 Tangible additions to learning infrastructure

While there are other tangible outcomes from these projects which are of considerable importance, and which may be of greater medium term benefit than the numbers of individual clients helped. First among these is a set of physical and tangible additions to the learning infrastructure, many of which will have a productive life long after these projects have closed.

We do not propose to discuss them all in detail here, as they are described and assessed in the individual project summaries in the Appendix. Still, they represent a quite formidable and valuable range of learning aids, generally falling into one or other of the following areas:

- **learning resources/materials** – (for instance LGV and supervisor training in the Black Country Partnership for Learning and the Skillsbuild basic skills toolkit)
- **access points; call centres** (eg in Learning North East), websites (eg in the East Lancashire Learning Opportunities (ELLO) project), *etc.*
- **qualifications defined/established** (such as the on-line tutoring award developed by the Scottish Learning Network)
- **collations of learning-related databases** (eg the database on learning opportunities developed by ELLO)
- **on-line learning platforms refined and developed** (for instance for delivering learning to the arts and entertainment sector, NetGAIN-learning)
- **access aids to learning materials** (such as the Resource locator created by the Welsh Digital College and the interoperability standards developed by the DeCoslo project) .

It is our impression that more (sometimes significantly more) effort was put into the design, development and implementation of some of these learning tools than into their use in actually delivering learning. In many cases, this delivery was effectively seen as largely a matter of testing and refining the materials/kit/processes *etc.* more than as a key end in itself. We have already suggested that where projects combined a substantial task in developing such materials with a relatively short (and anyway finite) timetable, then this distribution of effort (whether de facto or by design) can readily be understood.

Indeed, this plethora of learning hardware reveals the importance which the ADAPT application process placed on strong, formal

and cash-related parameters focussed on these tangible outcomes, for development projects to work within, and be assessed against.

They have resulted in the development of a very substantial amount of physical resources. Yet at the same time, there seems to be no obvious provision to catalogue, assess and conserve these resources. Even within the individual projects, there is no formal mechanism to effect this, beyond their own internal evaluations, which as we will show later, are not really an adequate or appropriate means to this end. As we have indicated, several projects say that they intend to continue to develop their approaches, and to deliver learning using the resources which they have developed. But intentions are not always met, and it seems to us that there remains a significant danger that these resources may simply be dispersed, some to grow, but most to wither away.

## 2.3 Capacity building

The initiative saw the development of several different kinds of project partnership (*eg* issue focussed (BSA), milieu focussed (TUC), local/regional (North East, Scotland), technical (Wales), *etc.*, with different kinds of links between the members. We discuss the experience of partnership working within these projects in the next chapter in some detail, and there is no need to do so here.

However, we should note that, with one or two exceptions, the partnerships formed and tested within these projects seem likely to survive. The process of delivering these projects had variously led to:

- ‘wrong’ partners falling out of the project
- new partners being found and brought in, and
- improved understanding and communication within the partnerships.

As a result, most of the partnerships were in better shape on finishing the project than they were on entering it. We note the development of:

- Internally stronger partnerships because they were now established, proven, trusting in each other, with effective working relationships and procedures, *etc.*
- Externally visible partnerships with a developing reputation outside
- Clusters of experience/expertise developed simply through the recruitment of specialist staff, and the experience of delivering fairly focused projects

- Better connected projects, with inter-project links likely to endure, particularly if formed around a core of expertise.

The prospects to continue to develop the partnership seemed to be at their best where:

- the project leaders believed that they were well placed to contribute to Ufi in the area of their project specialism
- there were commercial prospects beyond Ufi, in the general market among learning providers and learners
- partnership members had worked together before; and/or where
- there was a consensus that more remained to be done, either in developing the approach in hand, or in working in proximate areas.

Even where the partnerships had not been as successful as had initially been hoped, with a consequent downsizing of the project's activities (*eg* Black Country), there was evidence of serious lessons being learned about how to structure such partnerships, and the emergence of a smaller, tighter grouping which might continue.

## 2.4 Experience gained (how-to outcomes)

Less tangible, but nevertheless important, outcomes perceived by these projects related simply to the experience they felt they had gained in how to achieve their various ends. Such experiences could be either internal (about how they might have operated more smartly) or external (with generic relevance in the wider learning milieu).

There tended to be considerable heterogeneity among the internal experiences, since they frequently related to the minutiae of their own arrangements, or to the specifics of their project. However, one fairly common lesson centred on the importance of having the right mix between initiator/visionary staff, and professional implementation. Several projects felt that they might have had the 'right' (or good, or interesting) ideas, but that they had not really enjoyed the expertise, or capacity, to implement these ideas as effectively as they would have wished. Others suffered badly when key individual members of the project left, either losing a sense of direction if an important initiator left, or losing momentum if a key administrator left.

Another internal lesson was the importance of having sound project management arrangements from the outset of the project. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but for the moment we can say that the more complex was the partnership, and the more inter-dependent were the different aspects of the project, the more significantly did purely technical project

management skills and procedures seem to be influencing project outcomes.

Among the external lessons, which it was suggested would have wider resonance, but which had nevertheless been important for the projects themselves:

- **marketing learning opportunities to potential beneficiaries;** most projects felt that they had acquired lots of experience about both the conceptual and mechanical aspects of marketing learning. They also felt that there were important differences in approach which distinguished successful approaches to individuals from SMEs and other corporate entities
- **the importance of learner support** was stressed as an important lesson which almost all the projects reported. To a more significant degree than they had generally anticipated, they had (almost) all found the need for, or recognised the value of:
  - on line tutor support during the process of learning; and,
  - direct support to potential learners in encouraging them to begin, and in finding the right place for them to do so.

## 2.5 Longer term outcomes

Several projects demonstrated a clear wish and capacity to continue. Some of them (*eg* WDC) felt that they had not yet realised their potential and would make a bigger impact in the future than had yet been observed. Most felt that their potential had not been, and was unlikely to have been, realised within a three year timeframe.

While some were perennially alert to forthcoming opportunities for European funding to follow on from ADAPT, others were acutely conscious that they needed a champion of some kind to take forward their work into the future. Most had looked to Ufi in this way, though that became less common as the projects wore on, and Ufi's plans and approaches crystallised.

It was a concern for these projects in particular that nobody was systematically collecting or collating the lessons and experiences which they had gained. They did not consider that this was a role which should rightly be played by their own internal evaluations. We have previously shown that they had placed little effort in this direction in any case. They welcomed a study like ours, but recognised too that we were only looking at a few examples. There was thus some concern among many of these projects that their potential (either to carry on themselves, or to inform the work of others) was not going to be realised in the longer term.

Since we have finished our fieldwork, Ufi has contacted the projects to point out the various ways in which outcomes could be captured. We have not been able to discuss with the projects the extent to which they will use these channels, although many are not new and do not seem to have seen much flow down them in the past.

## 2.6 Additionality

Most of these projects, and certainly all of the more successful ones, were characterised by a commitment to do something which pre-dated the ADAPT Third Round. In some cases, the lead organisation was intending to do something along similar lines, in others the partnership had worked together previously, and was looking for a means to develop or extend existing work and/or meet an identified need. The more successful the project had been, the more likely was it to have developed from some kind of earlier activity, or some prior grouping of much the same people.

In several cases, the principal ideas behind the project had already been sketched out by the proposers, who were actively looking around for a means of funding them, when the ADAPT round offered them an opportunity. Thus in this sense, many of these projects would have happened in some form or another, sooner or later. Rarely were they entirely inspired by, or prompted by, the ADAPT opportunity.

What this funding opportunity did for most of them, was to bring forward the work in time; to ensure that it was done now, rather than at some future point. Furthermore, as most of these projects were fairly substantial, particularly where the matched funding had been successfully and independently raised, it had allowed the ideas to be developed on a larger scale, or more professionally, than would otherwise have been the case.

Indeed, in the absence of some other substantial funding, it is difficult to envisage these projects being taken forward with the credibility, the visibility (to external world of market, clients, partners, beneficiaries), or the professional implementation which ADAPT allowed.

We have already pointed to the importance for these projects that the initiator became allied with a professional delivery team of some kind. It was often this acquisition of implementation staff, or of more staff with specialist expertise relevant to the projects technical or pedagogic needs, that the ADAPT funding supported. In this sense then, the ADAPT-Ufi funding provided an essential ingredient to allow these projects to grow beyond aspiration.

Additionally, if we consider these projects as pilots for programmes which may follow in their steps, then it is evident that they have all gained valuable experience in relatively new

fields of operation. To this extent the projects must certainly be viewed as delivering insights and lessons which could only be conjectured previously.

Finally, we should note that some particular aspects of these projects were unlikely to have been so prominent had they been undertaken in a different way, outwith the ADAPT-Ufi umbrella. The focus on SMEs would almost certainly not have been so widespread without ADAPT, and while there might have been some transnational element, it would hardly have been so consistent as it seems to have been with our projects.

Thus, it seems fair to conclude that although ADAPT-Ufi funding cannot be said to have fostered projects which would not otherwise have come about, there remain:

- extensive areas of additionality (in terms of timing, scale, professional implementation, *etc.*)
- important experiential outcomes which are important to have now rather than later/sometime/never, and
- significant elements within them which would not have been so prominent if they had not been supported in this way.

# 3. Processes

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In this chapter, we consider the process through which these projects delivered the outcomes discussed above. We look first at the managerial demands which these projects made on the partnerships delivering them, we consider the impact of the various ADAPT procedures and requirements on the projects, we review their evaluation activities, and we consider dissemination.

## 3.1 Project and partnership management

It has become increasingly clear to us during the course of this research that strong, professional project management skills deployed at the core of the project, either by a clear recognised and competent lead partner, or within the context of a sound, committed group of partners, represented a crucial contributor to the successful outcome of the projects. Effective project managers combining both the vision to inspire and lead, and the practical skills to ensure things got done, represented in our view, the most important feature of the most successful projects.

We alluded in the earlier chapter to the need for the projects to combine a good mixture of 'vision' and 'practicality', and it became clear to us that in several of these projects, some of the people involved in the original bid were better at the former than the latter. Thus, the ability either to have in place, or to generate, these delivery skills, was a paramount influence on the outcomes secured by these projects.

The existence of a strong, relatively experienced project lead organisation, which is accepted as such by the other partners, was an important indicator of eventual success. The process of submitting a bid for funding required partnerships to have a lead organisation, but in some cases this was clearly more nominal than real. They were in effect coalitions. Others had lead organisations who were clearly recognised (both within the project and outside it) as natural leaders, perhaps by virtue of their track record, their role in devising and operationalising the project, *etc.* While this did not ensure the continuing coherence of the partnership, it certainly seemed to have made them more robust. Other partners were more likely to accept their leadership, and they themselves were more likely to see it as their

responsibility to have in place the necessary management systems and procedures for which they (individually) will be accountable. These secretariat features were important, but did not themselves seem sufficient to produce agreement and commitment between partners, in the way that an accepted lead body role did. Successful partnerships appear to be those with organisations at the centre that provide both effective administrative and intellectual leadership.

Key procedures associated with these positive outcomes included:

- clear role definitions among the partners
- a co-ordinated and agreed workplan encapsulating them
- continuous monitoring of progress against plan
- regular, formal and simple means of communications between partners
- a capacity to respond early and creatively to unforeseen problems.

That these features are all fairly obvious, does not mean that all the projects enjoyed the benefits of them.

However, in our view, it was not just the professionalism of the project manager that counted but also the reach (*eg* in terms of influence and money) of their organisation and their capacity to support the project financially or otherwise through tricky (often cashflow-related) times.

A second factor with an important influence on outcomes, through the stability of the partnership, was that the partnership be bound together by other ties, most obviously having worked together successfully in the past. Thus we are able to extend our earlier conclusion that *'previous experience counts'* to say that it counts not just for understanding the procedures and processes necessary for securing this kind of funding, but also for understanding each other, and so for working together in implementing the project more easily. Once again though, it is important to warn against making too much of this point as our case studies include only a few examples of newly formed partnerships.

Finally, where there have been problems within partnerships and projects, at least part of the failure appeared to be one of poor internal communications. In one case, partners were failing to pool experience. In another the problem appeared to centre on the communications from the centre to the radial arms of the project. In both cases however the project did not appear to have strong coherent and well-accepted leadership at the centre, although in one the problems appeared to be more administrative than intellectual, while in the other the reverse appeared to be true.

### **3.1.1 Partnership structure and cohesion**

As we reported in our earlier interim reports, our ten case studies represent different types of partnership arrangements. Three types were identified, varying with the involvement of the partners with the project outcomes:

- federal partnerships – with largely independent partners responsible in large part for the outcomes of their own, generally separate sub-projects, under the umbrella of the whole ADAPT project
- linear partnerships – here the project is far more sequential, and the tasks of one partner are dependent on one another as the mix of partners represent the full value chain
- mutual partnerships – involve a range of partners all with varying degrees of responsibility for design, development and delivery.

Some of our initial concerns expressed in those reports have, to an extent, been realised. In a couple of cases, elements of federal and mutual partnerships have ‘spun off’ as partners have left the projects, taking their element with them. Federal partnerships seem to have been particularly prone to partnership problems, particularly where different partners, each with different and fairly independent bits of the project, simply wanted to go their own way, or, dropped out altogether. The structure of these partnerships simultaneously facilitated this kind of dispersion, since there was sometimes relatively little operational glue to hold them together, yet allowed the other partners to continue relatively unaffected.

Linear partnerships appear to have been more robust in this respect. This may be because the strong inter-dependency of the different elements and partners placed a stronger premium on sticking together. Thus in the linear projects there tended to be more attention paid to close management of partners, and more intense efforts made to defuse problems, or replace partners if they left. Indeed, where partners have left these projects, they had generally been replaced, indeed in one case by an organisation that had been generally able to provide additional impetus and inputs.

Mutual partnerships too generally needed to stick together to get anything worthwhile out of their project. They too tended to pay more attention than the federal projects to co-ordination and overall project management. However, in their case, the goal of contributing to Ufi development had often operated as an important stimulus. This was of course the case to some extent for all the projects, but linear and federal projects generally had other factors influencing how strongly their partnership cohered. Mutual projects, who had not felt that Ufi developments were

moving in their direction, seemed also to be prone to partnership problems, and associated loss of momentum.

Two general conclusions emerge from this analysis:

- **partners need to be committed if the partnership is to succeed.** This kind of commitment generally took two forms; firstly they might be inherently committed to the general concept with which the project was engaged, or secondly, they needed to see a long-term benefit for themselves in the partnership delivering. In practice of course most of our partnerships demonstrated both inherent and pragmatic forms of commitment, but usually in different mixes. Problems tended to emerge where partners with strong inherent commitment wanted to go their own way and felt constrained by the wider demands of the partnership, and where the pragmatists saw (or thought they saw) that the project was leading nowhere special
- **partners need to deliver;** *ie* to do what they said they would do, and work at roughly the same speed. Although this seems obvious, it was by no means easily achieved for some of these projects. Clarity about what was expected of them and when, was obviously an important pre-condition of this, and commitment (of either kind) to the general ends of the project clearly helped. Evidence of having successfully worked together previously seemed to be an important indicator that this kind of compliance would be secured again. Nevertheless, some project partners were simply knocked out of the game by unforeseen factors entirely out of their control, and others by some of the (to them) unnecessarily bureaucratic demands of the ADAPT framework. The capacity of the lead partner to sustain them, or to adapt to their difficulties was then a crucial factor in determining the outcome.

### **3.1.2 Flexibility within partnerships**

We pointed out in our second report that partnerships and the partners in them needed to be sensitive to, and responsive to, changing circumstances, both within the project itself, and in the outside environment. We concluded that:

*'Regardless of the type of partnership, a key success factor that appears to be emerging is the degree of flexibility partners are able to provide in fulfilling their role and responsibilities.'*

Thus, alongside the strength of the partnership discussed above, it also needs to be reasonably flexible. The kinds of factor which had been important in prompting this need for flexibility were:

- how Ufi had been developing in practice; there were clear differences between these projects in the importance which they placed on Ufi's development. At one extreme, some

projects have a rationale which is wholly independent of Ufi, and would be worthwhile even if Ufi did not exist. For others, being part of Ufi was a much more crucial aspect of their purpose. Thus, as the trajectory of Ufi development became clearer, and its contracting policies emerged, some projects found themselves trying to adapt to these developments, with varying consequences on their existing plans

- how the project itself had been turning out. Although the project plans had generally been quite detailed, few of them had actually turned out in practice exactly as envisaged. A delayed start, sometimes accompanied by difficulties with staffing and/or premises, were quite common. This was attributed by some of the projects to the complexity of ADAPT commissioning procedures, and the (long) time which it had often taken to get to contract stage within a fixed timetable. Others simply seemed to have miscalculated the logistics involved in getting their operation going. In some cases there had been technical problems which had not been foreseen, and in other 'political' problems with partnership members. For example in one project, no funds have so far been made available (for ADAPT contractual reasons), but one of the partners has put in additional resources to under-write expenditure and to compensate for the expected short-fall in contributions from SMEs. Similarly in another project the editing of learning material was originally estimated to take approximately one day a week for a given period. It in fact took four days a week, a burden the partner organisation has been willing to shoulder
- environmental changes – The most prominent change, which affected most of the projects, had been the tightening of the labour market, and the accompanying fall in unemployment. In some cases, this had made it difficult to recruit the kinds of beneficiaries envisaged under the ADAPT guidelines, in others, it had made it more difficult to retain key staff, as opportunities opened up elsewhere, and their fixed term contracts approached their end.

### **3.1.3 Other partnership management issues**

Generally speaking we concluded that projects' ability to adapt to the stresses and strains of delivering the anticipated outcomes in difficult/changing circumstances were eased by good project management and partner involvement (discussed above) and constrained by some of the ADAPT rules (see below).

The experience of some projects demonstrated how important it could be to maintain a 'line of sight' on the project goal and not be distracted by changing circumstances *eg* DeCoslo believed in what they were doing and were not put off by the lack of early positive responses from Ufi.

In some cases, we observed that the capacity to manage projects like this had grown through project experience. Many of these projects were dealing with new things in a new way and have had to learn how best to do that the hard way. This experience has helped develop project management capacity in this area. People are far more aware of what can and what cannot feasibly be done (within a project timescale, *eg* on-line assessment). Unfortunately, it was not always possible retrospectively to secure what a more professional approach to project management might have secured from the outset.

We again felt that some of these projects may have been over-complex in design. Certainly there seems some evidence to support the notion that all things remaining equal, the more successful projects have been the more single-issue projects ones (see Section 2.2 in the first report). However, other things have not remained equal, and it is not possible to be more decisive about this.

Finally, we observed that projects cannot be too far out in front of their perceived market – *eg* some projects had been constrained by lack of sufficient on-line training material, lack of access to PCs in their target market; computer illiteracy in FE *etc.* Thus, we conclude that these projects needed to assess quite how forward-looking they needed to be. The best certainly benefited greatly from being slightly ahead of the game, but there were some evident dangers in being too far ahead.

## **3.2 ADAPT procedures**

In our earlier reports, we noted in detail how far these projects had been influenced in their activities and the ways in which they have sought to carry them out by their origins in the ADAPT programme. Although we (like them) have tended to concentrate on the negative aspects of these origins, we do not in any way want to suggest that they are solely negative. ADAPT targets have helped to keep projects 'on line' *eg* in that they have had to have regard to SMEs and individual beneficiaries whereas if given a free hand they might not have done. Whether there are any tangible benefits for the target groups is another matter. They have also introduced elements like international links which would probably not have come about on their own accord.

Nevertheless, we have identified four features of the ADAPT origins which seem to us to have been particularly problematic for these projects, and we discuss them in turn.

### **3.2.1 Targeting beneficiaries**

The most marked contrast between the ADAPT approach and that of Ufi was that, while both seek to widen participation in learning,

particularly among people who do not have a track record in continuing training or education, ADAPT was specifically targeted at fairly narrow groups, *viz*:

- people under threat of redundancy or who had recently been made redundant
- workers in small and medium sized enterprises.

Ufi has less restricted scope, and seeks to extend participation to all not presently enjoying it.

The consequence for these projects has been that either they:

- restrict their attention to the ADAPT beneficiaries, or
- extend it to cover Ufi groups also, but only counting beneficiaries from the ADAPT target groups for funding purposes.

This has had a real effect on projects which wanted to test mass-marketing techniques, and it has raised a question mark over the applicability of materials produced under these projects for wider client groups.

In practice, the definition of eligible beneficiaries has not been as restrictive as they first feared, so long as they broadly fell under the categories of disadvantaged and exposed elements of the labour market. Some projects ensured that at least part of their work focused clearly on ADAPT-type beneficiaries and were using other funds to deliver to their other target groups.

Many reported being in discussions with the ADAPT Support Unit over the issue. We conclude that although the strict ADAPT definitions of targets have in practice been extensively liberalised, this has not left projects with as free a hand to pursue broad target groups as they would have wished, and as perhaps Ufi would have wished too. Project general targets were established at design time, and have proven too difficult to shift entirely.

### **3.2.2 Flexibility**

Perhaps more importantly, the combination of the caution engendered by this uncertainty about target groups, plus the somewhat complex ADAPT procedures for project and financial administration, have had the effect of slowing down and constraining the flexibility within the projects to adapt their plans to emerging circumstances. This is not to say that all, or even major, variation from the project proposals has been ruled out, but it is generally only the bolder of the projects, or those with some prospect of alternative funding, who have introduced any significant variation from blueprint.

Certainly some imagination has been in evidence in trying to ensure projects are both generally successful and meet ADAPT criteria, the problem has been that the ADAPT regulations have meant that the room for manoeuvre has been unnecessarily limited.

### **3.2.3 Small and medium sized enterprises**

The general concerns about the ADAPT focus on SMEs, and the wishes of Ufi and some of our projects also to focus on larger firms, and to concentrate on key sectors, has been noted already in our earlier reports. Again we concluded there that:

*'While this does not invalidate the contribution the projects can make towards the Ufi goals, it does have the effect of limiting them.'*

The most prominent problem which this has created is the contradiction between the wishes of some projects to draw in large employers, either as providers of matched funding or of expertise/resource, and their inability to count their employees as beneficiaries. Consequently, because such larger firms have not been able to see some tangible benefits to themselves (in terms of employee learning), the projects have encountered otherwise needless constraints in drawing them in to their activities.

By contrast, the ADAPT restrictions on payments from projects has precluded the participation of some SMEs who do not have sufficient IT equipment to take part in the project, and yet whom the project have sought to draw in as sources of otherwise suitable beneficiaries. Similarly, many of the projects had encountered problems with securing their intended amounts of matched funding from SMEs, or providing the necessary documentation to log their involvement for funding claims.

### **3.2.4 Administrative requirements**

Generally most projects were concerned about the 'bureaucratic overload' that the ADAPT funding rules placed on them and their procedures. This was raised in our earlier reports, but has continued throughout the projects' lifespans to detract from the operational resources which they can rely on.

The level of bureaucracy on the ADAPT programme may be no different to that on other ESF-funded programmes, and we recognise the need to regulate the manner in which, and the extent to which, projects draw in, and spend, matched funds. However it remains the case that difficulties (real and perceived) in having these funds accepted as eligible, has dogged most of these projects for most of their lives and used up significant amounts of management and administrative time.

Coupled to this point is the concern expressed among the projects about the apparent stuttering nature of the ADAPT cashflow arrangements which in some cases appeared to have severely delayed ESF payments. Again the smaller the project, the bigger the concern, unless one of the major partners was prepared to bankroll the exercise on the assumption that funds would flow eventually.

### 3.3 Evaluation

One facet of the ADAPT regulations for these projects was the requirement for an evaluation of the work of the project. In our earlier reports, we showed how few projects seemed to have placed very high priority on this, and although some had appointed evaluators, and had them in place during the process of setting up and running the projects, in no case had the evaluators then reported.

During the past year, this has changed somewhat, with all the projects having engaged in some kind of evaluation exercise. We observe though a massive variety in the practice. Some have appointed independent evaluators; others have effectively done the job from within the project itself. Some have looked at both processes and outcomes; others just at the latter. Some have been funded adequately to do a credible job; others have worked on a shoestring.

The evaluations are discussed individually in the case studies in the Appendix, but looking at them in general, we can see that they have generally reported fairly late in the day. We conclude that they have almost exclusively been *post-hoc* evaluations, with little evidence that they have influenced the course of the projects during their lifetimes.

Most of the evaluations have been descriptive; *ie* at best they have measured what the projects actually did, and they have assessed how effectively they did it. What they have not generally done is to show

- whether what the project did actually made any difference (*ie* whether the learners who ostensibly benefited from the projects were actually any better off; whether similar outcomes would have been observed anyway, *etc.*)
- how the projects might have better approached their work, and/or more effectively secured the same ends.

Thus, while the evaluations may have produced some limited descriptive information about what the projects did, and how, they do not really go beyond this limited outcome focus. As a result, they do not readily contribute greatly to understanding any wider lessons which might be learnt from these projects.

It is our view nevertheless that there are important lessons to be learnt from the projects. In order to access them however, Ufi will be unable to rely simply on collating the self-evaluation evidence. It might have been better for Ufi to have appointed an independent evaluation of its own, with a remit to search for the broader lessons, but it may well be too late for this now.

### **3.4 Dissemination**

As with evaluation, the ADAPT guidelines required projects to disseminate their results widely. This has not been a responsibility which all have equally taken seriously. Thus almost all had established websites, describing their projects and their activities; fewer had published more widely. Most had sought to disseminate to their immediate constituency (of like projects, similar institutions, and similar markets), but few had published significantly beyond it.

In general terms, we found that the more serious and well-managed the project, the better and more substantial had the dissemination been. As a result, we did not find any clear connection between the extent or level of dissemination, and the intrinsic value of the results being disseminated. Rather, the dissemination tended more often to be a function of the general level of project management than the substantive results.

The onus to disseminate generally, and to Ufi in particular, appears to have been on the project to get its messages across. While some opportunity for dialogue has been gained through the cluster groups, it does not seem that Ufi has made widespread or general efforts to investigate these projects, their activities, outcomes or lessons. Of course, when a project seems to have caught Ufi's interest they have got more involved, but essentially the responsibility seems to have been left with the projects themselves.

Not only has this been minimal in some of the projects where things had not gone smoothly, but also, some have had reason (essentially centred on uncertain intellectual property rights) not to disseminate in detail.

# 4. Implications for Ufi

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In this chapter we consider the implications for Ufi's future development which can be drawn from these projects. We look first at the direct lessons and implications, concerning Ufi's common interests with the project in certain substantive issues or questions and draw out the main themes of relevance to Ufi from the projects. We also identify the specific and wider benefits for Ufi that have accrued. Finally we look at the interaction between Ufi and the projects and how and whether these lessons and points of interest have been communicated.

## 4.1 Four main themes

The experiences of our case study projects, both negative and positive hold a range of implications for Ufi's initial and ongoing development. Many of the lessons were primarily project specific, relating to their particular objectives, or circumstances and these are spelt out in the individual case study reports. In this section we draw together common themes which appear to relate directly to the twin Ufi aims of stimulating the demand for lifelong learning, particularly among those not actively engaged in learning, and of promoting a range of learning provision through the use of information and communications technology. They are considered under the following headings:

- Using ICT as a learning medium
- Marketing learning to non-learners
- The structure of learning provision
- Joining up policy initiatives.

### 4.1.1 Using ICT as a learning medium

All the projects, to a lesser and generally to a greater extent, encountered a range of problems in using ICT as a platform for learning. One broad theme that emerged was the lack of capacity within the community to embrace on-line learning. For instance, two major constraints faced by a range of projects centred on:

- a lack of ICT facilities among the key targets groups – most notably SMEs – many of whom did not possess or have access to Internet-enabled computer software or hardware, and
- a lack of skills and familiarity with using ICT among ‘non-learners’ in SMEs and elsewhere.

The hurdles are not surprising given that the target audience for these projects largely inhabit the ‘wrong side’ of the digital divide and the least engaged in the Information Society. However the extent to which they lacked ICT facilities and skills seemed to have caught our projects somewhat by surprise. It was not just potential learners who suffered from an ICT deficit, many of our projects also found that the intermediaries through whom they hoped to deliver their objectives were similarly deprived and colleges and advice and guidance agencies for example did not have the ICT equipment or familiarity to embrace on-line learning with ease.

The result was that projects ended up having to provide a more basic and simple offering (*eg* CD-ROM or even print-based materials, rather than on-line) than they had originally envisaged as anything too technical was beyond the capability of their clients to use. Interestingly there were signs of an improvement during the course of the project. For instance by the time that the NetGAIN-Learning project organised its second pilot of its ICT-based learning framework it found that a limited number of off-the-shelf learning packages had become available.

On the other side of the coin however, projects also found the upper limits of the ICT infrastructure were lower in some respects than they had envisaged. For instance, many projects found a lack of existing high quality on-line learning materials that they could use. This led some to create their own on-line materials, with variable success. Projects also reported that the limits of the Internet in terms of bandwidth capacity and its ability to sustain high quality video links for example, further constrained their progress. In another case, (Learning North East) project workers found that they could not use Internet-enabled mobile phones to link remotely their lap-tops to the project’s learning database.

So the first lesson, one which Ufi have undoubtedly encountered on its own, is the importance of keeping pace with technological developments on the one hand and their take-up on the other. Many of these issues were an inevitable consequence of being at the ‘leading edge’ of the development of what is now generally referred to as an ‘e-learning’ infrastructure and raise questions over the pace and extent of the ‘on-line revolution’ that Ufi seeks to bring about. The key point is the extent to which Ufi and the projects are able to lead their prime clientele without getting too far ahead as to be over the horizon and loose touch altogether. The experience of our projects tells us that getting the balance right is

crucial to the overall success of the policy and that it is safer to under rather than over-estimate the power and reach of ICT.

Where projects were involved in the development of on-line materials, two further themes emerged:

- the importance of developing standards, for instance 'tagging' and classifying learning objects so that they can be easily assembled into new e-learning packages and intellectual property and royalty rights secured (DeCoslo)
- the importance of developing materials on a large enough scale to ensure that they are of sufficient quality. All the projects involved in the e-learning product development reported that the task turned out to be much bigger than initially envisaged.

Finally, all the projects also learnt about the importance of ensuring that their own ICT systems are effective, not just in technological terms (*eg* ensuring the web-sites are effectively designed) but also in terms of content. In particular databases of learning provision need to be accurate and kept up-to-date and designed in such a way that they can pick up all types of provision (*eg* including bespoke courses which may not have a pre-determined start and finish date).

#### **4.1.2 Marketing to non-learners**

A number of the projects were also involved in trying to stimulate the market for learning, particularly among people without a history of engagement. Leaving aside the problems caused by the dissonance between the mass-marketing approach of Ufi and the targeted approach of ADAPT, many of our projects sought to raise demand for learning among 'non-learners'. The strategies adopted generally had two elements:

- promoting the value of learning to motivate interest in learning
- ensuring that any interest was turned into engagement as easily as possible by seeking to overcome any perceived barriers.

#### **Promotional campaigns**

The broad lessons that emerge from their experience on the promotional front include:

- the importance of ensuring that promotional messages are concerted and are given over a long period of time and on a number of levels

- it is more effective to target any promotional effort directly at the target audience through relevant media and channels, rather than a mass marketing approach
- thirdly, any promotional campaign benefits from proactive follow-up by appropriate people (*eg* the Learning Advisers in Learning North East).

### Overcoming barriers to learning

Specific measures that were felt to be effective in over-coming perceived barriers included:

- **Making learning easy to access** – improving the provision of information about courses, through the development of website access, call centres and freephone numbers. A number of projects stressed the value of local call centres staffed with people who knew the geography and culture of local communities and could therefore relate better to callers' enquiries. Also of importance was felt to be the development of tasters and 'bite-sized' chunks of learning for people to try, which could be print or CD-ROM-based rather than on-line.
- **Provision of personal support to learners** – perhaps one of the most striking lessons to come out of the projects is the importance of personal support to learners. While some of this support could be provided on-line (*eg* through e-mail bulletin boards *etc.*), off-line support, in the form of, face-to-face or at least telephone contact was felt to be important in overcoming the anxieties or lack of knowledge among non-learners, both in the workplace and in the wider community.
- **Financial support** – a number of the projects stressed the importance of the linkage they made with Individual Learning Accounts initiative as they provide an element of financial leverage to encourage involvement.
- **Quick rewards** – learners, especially in SMEs needed to quickly gain the value of the learning if they were not to feel it was a 'waste of time' and be turned off.

#### 4.1.3 Structure of learning provision

At least two important implications for the general structure of learning provision, whether based on ICT or not, emerged from the projects. In some ways they have been identified already but as their implications spread beyond the confines of Ufi they may be worth highlighting separately.

The first involves the structure of qualifications. In that one of the virtues of e-learning is that it is able to provide 'bite-sized' segments of learning this can present issues for the way qualifications are accredited. If people successfully complete modules of a larger course, should that be recognised and

certificated in its own right or merely serve as a credit towards the final qualification?

The second is the importance of providing human support to learners, *ie* people who could help others become engaged in and maximise the benefit from learning. In the projects such support took two forms:

- **‘learning support’** *ie* providing information, encouragement or guidance on accessing learning. Perhaps the two best examples here are the work-based learning representatives whose role has been developed by the TUC’s Learning Services project and the community-based Learning Advisers in the Learning North East project, and
- **‘learner support’** – helping learners get the most out of their course through a range of services from technical help (how to make the ICT work) to more intellectual support (*eg* in the form of tutorials). This could involve a range of on-line and off-line support (*eg* Scottish Learning Network).

#### **4.1.4 Linking across initiatives**

Another theme underlying a number of the projects was about the importance of linking across policy initiatives and building synergy between them. The most common example involved the use of the Individual Learning Accounts as a financial incentive for potential learners. Other linkages were made with policies such as the Union Learning Fund and Connexions. Further connections were made with wider policy initiatives such as the creation of the Information Society and regional development.

## **4.2 Specific benefits for Ufi**

Apart from the general lessons which the projects threw up for the development of Ufi, there were a number of specific benefits arising from the projects. Examples were given in Chapter 2 and discussed in more detail in the separate case study volume of this report. Some have directly fed into the Ufi approach. Three of which we are aware include:

- interoperability standards developed by DeCoslo
- the BSA’s basic skills toolkit which is being piloted in two sectors by Ufi
- the on-line tutoring award from Scottish Learning Network project.

Others have added to the stock of on-line learning materials and/or may lead to specific benefits in the future.

## 4.3 Wider benefits

In addition to the specifics we have seen that the projects have led to a range of wider benefits too, which serve to create a more conducive environment for Ufi to grow and flourish. Most notably these include:

- **the development of an embryonic e-learning infrastructure** – through the projects a number of agencies, learning providers (*eg* further education colleges) and other intermediaries (*eg* in trade unions) have begun to grapple with issues associated with on-line learning provision much faster than they would have done. In so doing they have built up an infrastructure, learnt technical and pedagogic skills and gained valuable experience and are therefore in a better position to engage with Ufi than they would otherwise have been
- **growing ICT capability** – the direct beneficiaries of the projects (in SMEs and the wider community) have almost all had experience of using ICT either to access learning packages or to learn from them. While the numbers involved may be a ‘drop in the ocean’ in terms of the total of potential Ufi customers, they do represent a small step in the direction of creating a more receptive audience
- **a range of experienced partnerships** – capable of designing and delivering Ufi-related projects. A number of the partnerships, or at least the key partners, have subsequently become involved in Ufi hubs and other elements of the Ufi infrastructure. However this point must not be over-emphasised. It is interesting to note that some have not. Being involved in the ADAPT projects did not prove to be a passport to involvement with Ufi for the project partners. Similarly, not being involved in a development project has not debarred organisations from subsequent Ufi involvement.

## 4.4 Learning the lessons

Previous reports have documented the health of the relationship between the projects and the Ufi policy team. We have noted that while the mechanisms nominally existed for projects to exchange their experiences with the centre, these have not meant that the majority of projects feel that the lessons they have to offer have been taken up. While some projects have enjoyed being on an ‘inside track’ with Ufi, due to personal relationships or the important position held by members of the partnership, in the main projects have felt outside the Ufi family.

We also found that the relationship had improved between our first and second reports and since then, we have found that relationship has improved further as:

- projects have moved to the delivery phase and more clearly have something to offer, and
- Ufi has staffed up and is in a better position to spend time communicating with and listening to the projects.

It is interesting to note that two of the projects that had felt that they had been cold-shouldered by Ufi at the time of the last report, told us this time that they had been able to influence Ufi events nationally more recently. For instance, Ufi have adopted the interoperability standards established by the DeCoslo project, having previously appeared to have been against open standards and interoperability. Secondly Ufi now appears to have been persuaded of the advantages of a sector specific focus on learning, as a complement to the individual focus, and, for instance, is working with Metier on a pilot study, one of the principal partners behind the NetGAIN-Learning project.

Taken together these two instances provide valuable evidence of the ability of the projects to influence the development of the policy.

#### **4.4.1 Communication channels**

As set out in the previous reports, Cluster Groups were established with the specific intention of acting as a forum for exchanges between the projects and the national policy team. It is clear that these were very variable in providing projects with the feeling that they were actively engaged in feeding into the development of the national policy. Despite an apparent effort from the Ufi centre halfway through our evaluation to re-energise the clusters, a number of projects still held the view at the end of their time that they were ineffective. This may be partly because projects did not themselves obtain value from the clusters as they did not act as an effective forum for networking between projects. A couple would have preferred clusters to have been organised differently *eg* on sectoral grounds.

Other channels between the projects and the centre have also been developed including:

- personal contacts, of a formal or informal nature, some of which have been felt to be extremely useful both in terms of understanding what was happening at the centre and letting the centre know what was happening on the ground
- Steering Group membership, which for example in the case of the DeCoslo project proved a very effective way of building a positive relationship with the policy centre, following a sticky start
- contacts at regional level when the structure was put in place
- newsletters and other written material.

Most recently Ufi has written to projects clearly outlining a range of routes available to enable ADAPT projects to share their outcomes with the centre. The list serves to highlight the lack of channels available as the projects started out.

### **Inter-project communication**

All projects built up their own networking arrangements with other projects over time and these were often felt to be extremely valuable. One respondent argued that:

*'There has been more sharing between the projects than between the projects and Ufi.'*

#### **4.4.2 Factors affecting the relationship**

A range of factors appear to have influenced the character and intensity of the relationship between the projects and Ufi. These included:

- the Ufi agenda and timetable – the projects were running at the same time as Ufi itself was being operationalised. Strategic decisions had to be taken perhaps before the projects were in a position to influence them. In other words the lessons were being learnt too late to be of real value
- interests did not coincide – projects have often had 'wrong' view of Ufi as omniscient and with very wide interests. Reality has been much more precise and focussed. Result is that some projects have been disillusioned by an apparent 'lack of Ufi interest' (but others have been galvanised by this)
- communication channels – despite the formal mechanisms, it appeared that there was no obvious systematic effort by Ufi to glean lessons from them and that mostly the onus was on the project to communicate its experiences to Ufi. Their ability to was in turn dependent on the extent to which they had learnt and codified lessons, with was further a product of their evaluation strategy. Without an effective form of ongoing evaluation, apparent lessons were in danger of being based on impressions and anecdotal evidence rather than being empirically sound. However as we saw in Chapter 3, evaluation had a tendency to be partial, not always independent and sometimes very modest.

# 5. Conclusions

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In this last chapter we draw together our conclusions from the study and seek to answer two questions, which we believe are at the heart of this evaluation. Firstly have the projects been able to exercise a meaningful influence on the development of the Ufi policy? Secondly what are the factors that have influenced the impact of the projects on policy development and how might this have been better?

Before addressing these points, it is worth highlighting the limitations of our study. First the project was specified and designed to consider these issues largely from one side of the fence. We have concentrated our efforts on the projects and worked with them to identify what they have achieved and why and how emerging lessons have been communicated to Ufi. While we have had some discussions with Ufi officials, this study has not in any way comprehensively looked at how the Ufi policy itself has developed, what influence the form and nature of that development and the role that the projects have had in its evolution.

Secondly as we said at the outset our ten case studies may not be representative and others may have had a greater or lesser influence on policy development.

To these extents our conclusions are necessarily partial and may stand correction by a consideration of a wider pool of evidence. Nevertheless, we do believe that the findings are a valid reflection of these ten projects all of which certainly had the potential to be a useful test-bed for aspects of the Ufi policy as it was initially conceived.

## 5.1 Have the projects contributed to the development of Ufi?

All of the projects, to a greater or lesser extent, have been successful on their own terms. They have directly benefited a range of learners and intermediaries. A wide variety of outputs have been secured. Their own evaluations, despite their own shortcomings which we have addressed, have nevertheless generally been positive.

In so doing they have been able to make a number of direct and indirect contributions to the development of Ufi. Specifically they have contributed to the development of a national e-learning infrastructure both technically and in terms of content. Not all of the outputs generated have been taken up by Ufi, although there are some signs that more will in the future.

More generally, beyond the immediate Ufi milieu, these projects have geared up learning providers, agencies and other intermediaries to be more aware of Ufi and have the skills and capacity to become involved. They have also helped, albeit modestly in some cases, to generate interest in on-line learning among individuals and small companies. On their way, they have hit some of the inevitable hurdles that Ufi has faced and will face at an earlier stage than Ufi did itself. It is not clear, at least to the projects themselves, whether these experiences have been effectively taken on board at the centre. Furthermore it is not clear to us how Ufi would have developed in a radically different way if they had. The lack of high quality on-line learning materials and the difficulties of marketing learning to non-learners are problems Ufi has been set up to over-come. Being more aware of the storms ahead does not inevitably mean that a different course would have been adopted, although expectations about the extent and ease of progress made have been different.

## **5.2 What has influenced the impact the projects have made, and how might this have been better ?**

The extent to which the projects have been able to influence the Ufi agenda has been affected by a number of factors to do with the projects themselves, the environment in which the projects and Ufi were seeking to develop and the relationship between them. These serve to both weaken the projects' voice and impede Ufi's ability to hear it.

- the ADAPT rules – meant that the projects were not totally aligned with key features of Ufi and were therefore always having to face in a slightly different direction. The accounting procedures, inevitable under any EU project, also meant that project energies were dissipated
- project design – however even given the necessity to orientate themselves differently it is not clear that projects effectively geared themselves up either to identify lessons for Ufi through effective evaluation or communicate them effectively
- project management – despite strong project management skills in some of these projects, most of them ran late, several were badly squeezed towards the end, some ran into difficult partnership problems, *etc.*. All of these problems would have been helped by more initial guidance from ADAPT about the

*internal* management conventions and procedures which projects should have in place. By contrast, ADAPT guidance/requirements concentrated too much on the *external* administrative procedures

- duration – the common experience of late starts, rushed completion, under-delivery *viz a viz* beneficiaries, and timetable extensions, suggests to us that three years may simply be too short a timeframe in which to establish, deliver and effectively evaluate projects of this kind
- communication channels – the situation was compounded by initially ineffective relationships between the projects and Ufi. The Cluster group process was largely felt to be inadequate. Staffing pressures at a time when initial decisions were being made, meant that Ufi had a very limited capacity to spend time listening to projects and understanding the implications of what they had to say
- parallel development – the projects and Ufi were developing simultaneously and not sequentially. The Ufi timetable meant that decisions had to be taken before lessons emerged from the projects.

We have throughout reported on these issues which seem to us to have had enormous bearing on the success or otherwise of these projects (the characteristics of successful partnerships, the importance of formal project management skills, the need for a comprehensive vehicle to pick up and catalogue lessons and experiences arising from them, *etc.*). However, most important of all in our view is the effective balance which is struck between the formal conventions and procedures through which the commissioning body defines and monitors these projects and their activities, and the flexibility it allows the projects as circumstances unfold. In our view, the ADAPT approach leaned too heavily on the former, and allowed insufficient scope for the latter. Furthermore, in so far as ADAPT procedures were strongly rule-led, such rules were generally designed to serve the purposes of the commissioning body, and not the development project. In this case, Ufi inherited ADAPT procedures which it might not have invoked itself. In any future development projects which Ufi might undertake, we would hope to see an altogether more liberal and administratively 'lite' set of procedural arrangements, coupled with a lot more guidance to projects about how they should manage themselves.