NRDC

National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Interim Report

Study of the impact of the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on learners

Interim report on the qualitative strand

Paul Davies on behalf of the qualitative strand 'team'
Lancaster and Sheffield Universities

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INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to research and rationale

This study aims to examine the impact of the **Skills for Life** learning infrastructure on the experience and achievement of learners. It is being undertaken to complement the longitudinal study involving the teachers and trainers who deliver the **Skills for Life** national strategy. It has adopted a multi-method approach embracing both quantitative and qualitative strands. The overall learners' study has been designed around samples used by the teachers survey so that we will be able to triangulate the different sets of data.

1.2 Purpose of this report

This interim report provides an account of the main issues emerging during the early stages of the three-year study. In keeping with the participatory philosophy of the study, we hope that the responses we receive to this report will enable us to 'fine tune' our approach. Our chief concern has been clarity of presentation rather than depth of analysis, since this is a description of work in progress rather than a set of considered conclusions. The issues to which we draw attention should not be viewed as 'findings' but as areas where we need to collect more evidence.

We have not included the full range of issues to emerge so far during the study, since some are still tentative and based on limited data. The ten issues covered in the report would benefit from further analysis but have been raised frequently during the interviews.

This report is based on the first 50 interviews we have undertaken, together with data gathered from the workshops. (See appendix 3 for further details about the interview sample).

1.3 The qualitative strand

Case study sites
The qualitative strand is participatory in nature and evaluators have worked closely with key stakeholders in order to develop the overall framework of the evaluation and its key indicators. It is based on six case study sites and is being conducted over three years. The sites are:

- Birmingham and Solihull.
- Cheshire and Warrington.
- London West.
- Northumberland.
- Swindon and Wiltshire.
- West Yorkshire.

These six sites were selected from 18 Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas already identified by a parallel study of teachers.

First stage

The first stage of the qualitative strand has included meetings and workshops with key stakeholders to help with the design of the evaluation as a whole. We have undertaken an initial sweep of each of the six sites to obtain baseline information from local co-ordinators and managers. We plan to return to the sites in the autumn to undertake our first round of interviews with learners. (See appendices 1 and 2 for information given to stakeholders and appendix 4 for the initial interview questionnaire.)

Focus on providers and stakeholders

Although the main focus of the qualitative strand is the impact of the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on learners, we have not yet interviewed learners themselves. Because the evaluation is intended to be participatory, we aim to take stakeholders' questions into account before interviewing learners and the first stage of the study has therefore focused on shaping the evaluation in consultation with providers and stakeholders. We also believe it is necessary to have a good understanding of how the strategy has been interpreted and implemented in the six case study sites before we interview learners. Data from learners will form a major part of subsequent reports.

1.4 Peer review

This report was read and peer-reviewed by: Laura Taggart, Jan Chatterton and Elaine Fisher.

2. The main findings so far

2.1 Phases of development

Most of the information about phases of development was supplied by the **Skills for Life** Strategy Unit (SfLSU), formerly known as Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU), and LSC staff who were in a particularly good position to take a wide perspective on the **Skills for Life** initiative. The general view was that three distinct phases could be identified:

■ Supporting the development of the infrastructure.
■ Building up partnerships.
■ Re-focusing on embedded provision.

These phases are characterised by a significant change from an opportunist to a more sophisticated approach. Initially, it seemed easier to build up provision in areas where opportunities presented themselves. However, it was now felt more important to concentrate on the development of provision that matched the skills needs of a particular region, even though this might require additional effort. Consequently, there is now more interest in increasing the involvement of employers in strategic thinking than in simply trying to meet as many targets as possible.

The general view is that the **Skills for Life** strategy is broadly on course although there were a few critical voices. For example, one provider of courses described the early phase of **Skills for Life** as 'a panic couple of years' because of the pressure to meet 'unrealistic targets' and said it was now necessary to review the validity of some of those targets.

2.2 The **Skills for Life** infrastructure

The majority of those interviewed thought the infrastructure had proved to be extremely valuable and that it was being well received by course providers and learners. Furthermore, they believed it compared very favourably with what was in place before and marked a major change in basic skills provision. They were confident that the infrastructure was having a positive impact upon learners although there were obviously some 'teething troubles'. The Standards and the Core Curriculum were thought to be particularly helpful.

However, there was some evidence that people were still coming to terms with parts of the infrastructure. For example, there was uncertainty about whether tutors should view the Core Curriculum as a rigid set of guidelines or a looser framework intended to stimulate further ideas. One person described the infrastructure as 'fantastic, but not uniformly great'. She felt more thought needed to be given to the role of initial learner assessment and still had some concerns about the validity and necessity of the national tests. But the general view was that the area was now ridding itself of its 'Cinderella status' and being seen increasingly as a crucial element within the education programme.

2.3 Building capacity

The consensus was that satisfactory progress had been made in building capacity, but there were still many difficulties to be addressed. The process seemed to be taking longer than anticipated (this is discussed under a separate heading).

Interviewees brought up four main issues:

- Establishing provider networks.
- Recruiting and development tutors.
- Ensuring quality.
- Regional variations

Establishing provider networks

A mixed picture was emerging. SfLSU, the LSC, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and others had put a lot of effort into building up provider networks, but with variable results. As a general rule, the FE sector was making an important contribution as were LEAs. However, other potential providers had been a little slow in becoming involved and their involvement varied between regions.

Regional co-ordinators had found the process of establishing provider networks 'testing', at times, although once again there appeared to be some variation between the regions. Difficulties included the fact that a number of initiatives had been launched under the *Skills for Life* umbrella, and that some elements, such as tutor training programmes, had not come on stream on time or in sequence.

Some respondents were surprised at the level of influence of key individuals in particular localities. Evidently, the experience of developing a network could be made easier or harder, depending on the views and actions of key individuals in important local agencies. This partly reflected differing degrees of priority given to the basic skills agenda and partly some inter-agency competition.

Recruiting and developing tutors

This was one of the most frequently raised issues during the interviews (along with targets) and the chief concern was that there were not enough qualified and experienced tutors. The tutor training qualifications had been slow to be introduced. The hoped-for process of professionalising the role of basic skills tutor was being undermined by the poor pay and conditions of service. Lack of sufficient numbers of qualified tutors was acting as one of the more serious brakes on the development of local provision.

Ensuring quality

Some felt that because of the pressure to build up capacity and keep the strategy as a whole on schedule, insufficient attention had been paid to quality. On the positive side, this was now acknowledged to be an issue, and measures were being taken to ensure that quality would be a prime determinant of future developments.

Regional variations

To some extent, each of the six case study sites was described as unique because of the nature of its population, its geographical features, its location in the country or its 'low baseline' of provision. The strategy was therefore developing somewhat differently in each of

these sites, and respondents were reassured that our conceptual framework had anticipated this and was sensitive enough to record it.

2.4 Balancing supply and demand

Balancing the supply of provision with the demand for learning was identified as the single most important task for those responsible for the co-ordination and implementation of the *Skills for Life* strategy. The most common way of describing this was as a 'chicken and egg situation' whereby it was not at all clear whether the provision or the demand for it should come first. The process was further complicated for decision- makers by targets, funding regimes, and time-scales.

However, this difficult situation seemed to be fairly well managed and the staff of key agencies were attempting to develop supply and demand in unison. For example, one region decided not to run a promotional campaign to attract new learners until it was confident that it had enough provision to meet this demand.

The issue of balancing supply and demand was posing challenges at every level of the strategy from those who were responsible for setting national targets through to individual providers who did not want to get into financial difficulties by failing to recruit enough learners to cover the cost of setting up courses. Although the situation was being managed reasonably effectively, it was also clear that it was a source of worry. As one clearly frustrated interviewee said, on being asked what he thought were the important questions that this study should ask, 'What make providers want to be involved and what makes learners want to learn?'

2.5 Learners

This study seemed to have the support of the people who were interviewed who felt they needed a much better understanding of the motives and behaviour of both potential and actual learners. Their previous experience, and the initial feedback they had received during the early stages of the strategy, had alerted them to the fact that learner motives and behaviour are complex. There was a genuine openness in their comments that, although they had a responsibility for providing learning, they still needed answers to certain fundamental questions about learners. In particular, they wanted to know:

- ■ The reasons behind an adult's decision to return to learning.
- ■ The most effective teaching and learning strategies.
- ■ The 'real' goals learners set themselves (as against assumptions that learners seek qualifications and good jobs).
- ■ Patterns of progression through the *Skills for Life* programme and beyond.

Managers at regional and local level felt they had to make sense of conflicting messages about learners. On the one hand, they were told that there was a real desire to obtain further qualifications to improve their employment prospects. On the other hand, they understood that there were large numbers of adult learners whose main learning goals were more personal: for example, to boost their self-esteem or simply for the companionship of being in a class.

At local level, providers were also dealing with complex situations. For example, they would have to work hard to attract learners initially and then equally hard, later on, to encourage them to leave the courses and seek jobs. (Once re-engaged with learning, many adults seem reluctant to leave it.)

One provider wondered whether learners shared 'the economic imperatives' of the *Skills for Life* programme. Another described tutors who did not think learners were interested in obtaining qualifications as 'patronising'. For the more neutral commentators, the big questions were:

- Do we construct a programme giving learners what they want or what they need?
- Is there a real difference between such wants and needs?

2.6 Targets

The issue of targets was raised frequently and was accompanied by the most forcefully expressed views, especially at local level.

It was widely thought that the strategy was on course to meet its targets. This was raised during interviews but then lost among other comments about the experience of participating in such a target-driven programme, the validity of targets and the pressure they put on individual providers.

Advocates of targets believed they served a useful purpose in providing focus and motivation and in stirring up an area that was frequently described as a 'comfort zone'. Advocates seemed to agree with the view that *Skills for Life* needed to be underpinned by a set of economic priorities. Critics, on the other hand, thought that targets lacked validity because they did not address the real issues with which learners were concerned. For example, would a Level 1 qualification really bring about a change in the quality of somebody's life?

In between these two extremes, others agreed with targets in principle but thought they had been badly managed. This had resulted in providers feeling the pressure of over-ambitious, partly inappropriate and frequently changing sets of targets. They were particularly interested in setting up better channels of communication between target setters and target users.

Target setting was a topic about which respondents had strong views. In one sense the debate about targets could be seen as a debate about who 'owns' the *Skills for Life* programme or, at least, who has the best understanding of what it might achieve – policy makers, tutors or the learners themselves.

2.7 Tutors

It was recognised that - even with the resources, infrastructure and guidance supplied by staff in agencies such as SfLSU, the LSC, LEAs and others - the success of the strategy, as measured by impact upon learners, mostly depended on the numbers, quality and motivation of tutors. Much effort was being put into supporting tutors and it was thought that the strategy would eventually professionalise this whole field, although there were also worries that this may not be fully achieved.

Skills for Life built on a long tradition of basic skills and adult education. Many existing tutors were committed to this area of work and thought they had a better understanding of it than those who had just begun to take an interest. There was therefore some potential for conflict between the experience and insights of tutors, 'steeped in traditions', and the 'fresh thinking' of those associated with the **Skills for Life** strategy.

The extra resources and heightened profile associated with **Skills for Life** were giving tutors quite a boost and many were responding positively. The introduction of new teaching qualifications was also well received in general. However, salaries and conditions of employment were still perceived to be poor, particularly where people were paid on temporary contracts and on an hourly or sessional basis. There were concerns that insufficient new staff would be attracted to the role, whilst existing staff might think that the conditions of service nullified the benefit of studying for further qualifications. It was also feared that qualified staff might leave to seek opportunities in other parts of the education service.

The shift in emphasis from discrete to embedded provision provided an opportunity to enlarge the **Skills for Life** workforce by including vocational tutors. Level 3 courses were being introduced, tailored to the needs of this particular group. Some had high hopes for the role of embedded provision in developing learners' literacy and numeracy skills within the context of a vocational course. They also thought vocational tutors would be enthusiastic because learners with better basic skills would be easier to teach. Others, however, were more cautious. First, they noted that the term 'vocational tutors' covered an enormous range of subject areas and backgrounds and that generalisations about the views of vocational tutors were therefore not sound. Second, there was some evidence that colleges were finding it difficult to provide vocational tutors with time to take courses so that they had to study 'in their own time'. Finally, a few commentators had concerns about the motivation or effectiveness of vocational tutors as teachers of basic skills.

2.8 Examples of progress

Interviewees gave several examples of areas where good progress was being made. They regarded these as essential 'building blocks' to support the development of other elements of the **Skills for Life** programme.

Awareness

One area of progress was raised awareness. The **Skills for Life** publicity, resources, political backing and support in key agencies was giving the strategy a higher profile. The whole area of basic skills education had been given a considerable and unprecedented boost, with more people outside the field now being aware of this topic. Comments such as 'basic skills is coming out into the open' and has been 'got onto the agendas of other organisations' showed that staff of agencies such as SfLSU and the LSCs were satisfied that their investment in promoting **Skills for Life** was now paying off. They were also excited by the fact that they had gained the attention of agencies outside the usual education field, such as those concerned with economic regeneration. A view expressed by several respondents was that the newly increased awareness and raised profile meant that basic skills was moving from the edge to the centre of educational interest.

Cultural change

A second area of progress was in culture change. There was a gradual move away from what was termed the 'deficit model' to a situation where many learners were regarded as having 'spiky profiles'. That is, they were strong in some skills, but not others. Although these learners were in a better position than those who needed to improve their skills across the board, they were still at a disadvantage because their lack of skills in some areas could prevent them from reaching their full potential. This movement away from the 'deficit model' had the additional advantage of removing part of the stigma attached to learning basic skills, which could now be presented as something that large numbers of people needed to brush up on. The shift of attention towards embedded provision was a further example of the change in culture.

There appeared to be an interesting debate in session about whether basic skills provision was in a better condition before or since the launch of the *Skills for Life* programme. Some people were described as living in a 'lovely past' where basic skills tutors had considerable autonomy and could run courses tailored to what they perceived as the needs of their students. Critics noted that it was characterised by limited resources, a 'Cinderella status' and a culture of 'teacher knows best'. Some thought that growing numbers of tutors and others now recognised that *Skills for Life* was a necessary change, and that advocates of this 'lovely past' were diminishing in number. Thus a further cultural change was taking place.

2.9 Slow progress

There was a general view that progress was being made in implementing the *Skills for Life* programme, but that it had been slower than anticipated: 'People at a high level think if they say it, it will happen.' Some were concerned about the speed of progress; others felt that an attempt to introduce radical changes in this complex area would inevitably take a long time.

Several reasons were put forward to account for the slow progress, such as:

■   The need to change deep-rooted cultures and mind sets.
■   The need to influence a wide range of autonomous organisations which may have had difficulty working together in the past.
■   Partners being primarily concerned with protecting their own interests rather than 'seeing the big picture'.
■   Problems associated with responding to a constant stream of initiatives and their subsequent modification.
■   Balancing the pressure to build up adequate levels of provision with the need to ensure quality.
■   Programmes not coming online in time or in the wrong sequence.

2.10 The bigger picture

During the course of the interviews, respondents were asked to answer questions about particular elements of the *Skills for Life* strategy. However, there were also occasions where they stood back from the details and reflected upon the programme as a whole and its place in the 'general scheme of things'. A selection of these comments is given below, reflecting a belief that the whole programme is on course, that there is still work to do and that there

needs to be a longer period of time before judgements can be made about its success.

"*Skills for Life* is something some of us have been fighting for. For others the strategy is not what they want."

"I think we are doing okay. We are hitting targets, building up capacity and clarifying terminology."

"An amazing improvement because it's becoming everyone's agenda."

"The impact of this kind of initiative, whether generally or project-based, is not really short-term."

"*Skills for Life* could just tinker, or if it works it could be much more substantial."

3. Conclusions

In terms of establishing the **Skills for Life** programme and developing capacity, there appeared to be two opposite views. Some people assumed that, if the resources are provided and the general direction set, things will happen. Others regarded the area as too complex for change to be successful. Most people occupied the middle ground where they recognised the extremes but tried to work with the opportunities and difficulties they encountered.

In terms of the impact of the programme, there were also two opposite views. Some respondents were anxious to detect immediate signs of impact, even though these might not be valid in the long term. Others felt that impact would only be detectable in the long term and even then would be difficult to isolate and measure. Many views sat between these two extremes, with people being primarily interested in gathering data about the impact at each stage of development so that judgements could be made about whether the strategy was on course and whether it was likely to make a positive impact on learners.
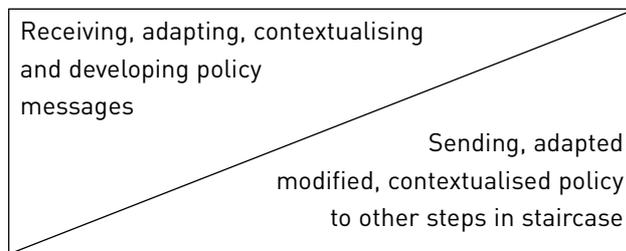
Appendix 1.
The implementation staircase

We understand change as a highly adaptive and 'practice'-based process, and illustrate this by using the metaphor of the 'implementation staircase' (see figure 1). This conceptual framework emphasises the way in which policy messages are adapted and modified by stakeholders as they are transmitted through a system and implemented. Each step in the staircase represents a group which modifies policy as it receives it and sends it on in this adapted form.

Figure 1 also shows the positioning of evaluation within the implementation staircase, identifying the central role of the learner. The staircase is not a 'one-way' policy implementation model and shows how learner voices can influence policy along with stakeholder groups. The learner's voice will be represented by the evaluation and made available to other stakeholders.

The staircase metaphor aims to reflect the importance of capturing, analysing, interpreting and 'constructing' the experience of the proposed change from the points of view of all the main stakeholders within the system. Further, it suggests that these points of view may well differ significantly and that the task of the evaluation is to uncover these important differences. The evaluation will attempt to pick up these subtle adaptations from the perspective of learners.

Key to figure 1

Receiving, adapting, contextualising and developing policy messages

Sending, adapted modified, contextualised policy to other steps in staircase

Each step represents stakeholder groups receiving, adapting and sending on policy messages
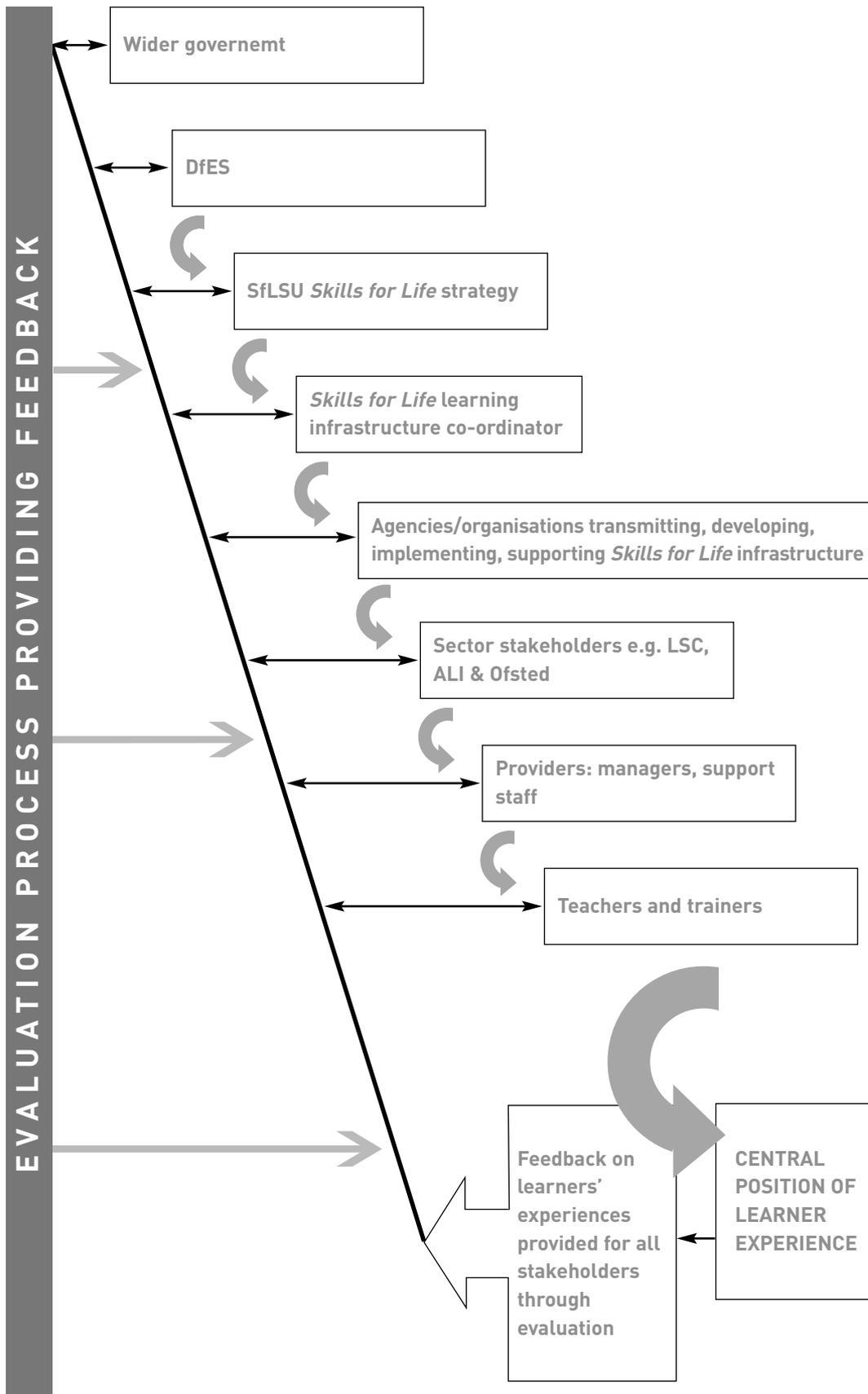
Direction of policy messages

Direction of evaluation, feedback and influence

Two-way flow of policy influence from stakeholding groups up and down the implementation staircase

Figure 1: the two-way implementation staircase

EVALUATION PROCESS PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Wider governemt

DfES

SfLSU *Skills for Life* strategy

Skills for Life learning infrastructure co-ordinator

Agencies/organisations transmitting, developing, implementing, supporting *Skills for Life* infrastructure

Sector stakeholders e.g. LSC, ALI & Ofsted

Providers: managers, support staff

Teachers and trainers

Feedback on learners' experiences provided for all stakeholders through evaluation

CENTRAL POSITION OF LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Appendix 2. Overview of the study

1   Aims

The study aims to examine the impact of the new *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on the experience and achievement of learners. It places particular emphasis on the effects of the programme on government priority groups, such as unemployed people, benefit claimants, prisoners, workers in low-skilled jobs and other groups at risk of exclusion.

The evaluation is participatory in nature and the team works closely with key stakeholders in order to develop the framework and key indicators. The evaluation adopts a multi-method approach embracing both quantitative and qualitative strands.

Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify aspects of the impact of the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on learners' experience and achievement.
- Provide evidence to help policy makers and other key users judge the value, strengths, and areas for improvement and development in the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure.
- Examine how policy messages and incentives are received, adapted and applied in practice.
- Identify how the learning infrastructure is being introduced and how it changes or progresses over time.
- Compare and contrast the findings of this study with the findings of a parallel study of teachers and trainers.
- Inform the 2006/7 review of *Skills for Life*.

2   The qualitative strand

The qualitative strand is based on six case study sites and will be conducted over three years. The sites are:

- Birmingham and Solihull.
- Cheshire and Warrington.
- London West.
- Northumberland.
- Swindon and Wiltshire.
- West Yorkshire.

These sites were selected from 18 Learning and Skills Council areas already identified by the parallel teachers study.

The first stage of the study included meetings and workshops with key stakeholders to help design the evaluation as a whole. This was followed by an initial sweep of each of the six sites to obtain baseline information from learners, teachers and managers. This data will also be used to guide the design of subsequent stages of the evaluation.

The three-year approach has the following characteristics:

■   It is longitudinal in the sense that we will be able to analyse how the situations in the various sites have developed over time. It is our plan to track some of the learners over time and so construct a picture of progression routes.

■   It is participative in that there will be ample opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to the development and direction of the study.

■   It is developmental in that managed flexibility has been built into the overall design. This flexibility will enable us to respond to issues identified by different groups of stakeholders during the course of the study.

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Appendix 3.
Stakeholder interview sample

SfLSU head office	1
SfLSU regional co-ordinators	6
Army basic skills co-ordinators	3
FE college senior managers and co-ordinators	9
Job Centre Plus basic skills co-ordinators	3
LEA managers and co-ordinators	3
LLSC basic skills staff	9
LSC national office	1
LSDA	1
Training provider managers	11
UFI	3

Appendix 4.
Initial interviews with stakeholders

1. What is (and has been) your role in the development and implementation of the ***Skills for Life*** programme?

2. What do you think its key priorities are?

3. How do you think it is different from what was in place before?

4. So far, what do you think its main successes have been? And what do you think are the main issues that still have to be addressed?

5. If you had to make a short list (four/five questions) of the key questions we should ask during this study – what would be on your list?

6. Would you like to be linked to the study in some way, e.g.
   - Join a regional workshop.
   - Be interviewed again – more detailed and specific questions.
   - Be emailed for views about questionnaires, etc.

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