




QUALITATIVE EVALUATION  
OF THE WOMEN AND WORK  
SECTOR PATHWAYS INITIATIVE:  
INTERIM REPORT


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
# **Qualitative Evaluation of the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative: Interim Report**

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## **Sector Skills Development Agency: Research Series**

### **Foreword**

In October 2002 the Department for Education and Skills formally launched Skills for Business (SfB), a new UK-wide network of employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), supported and directed by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). The purpose of SfB is to bring employers more centre stage in articulating their skill needs and delivering skills-based productivity improvements that can enhance UK competitiveness and the effectiveness of public services. The remit of the SSDA includes establishing and progressing the network of SSCs, supporting the SSCs in the development of their own capacity and providing a range of core services. Additionally the SSDA has responsibility for representing sectors not covered by an SSC and co-ordinating action on generic issues.

Research, and developing a sound evidence base, is central to the SSDA and to Skills for Business as a whole. It is crucial in: analysing productivity and skill needs; identifying priorities for action; and improving the evolving policy and skills agenda. It is vital that the SSDA research team works closely with partners already involved in skills and related research to generally drive up the quality of sectoral labour market analysis in the UK and to develop a more shared understanding of UK-wide sector priorities.

The SSDA is undertaking a variety of activities to develop the analytical capacity of the Network and enhance its evidence base. This involves: developing a substantial programme of new research and evaluation, including international research; synthesizing existing research; developing a common skills and labour market intelligence framework; taking part in partnership research projects across the UK; and setting up an expert panel drawing on the knowledge of leading academics, consultants and researchers in the field of labour market studies. Members of this panel will feed into specific research projects and peer review the outputs; be invited to participate in seminars and consultation events on specific research and policy issues; and will be asked to contribute to an annual research conference.

The SSDA takes the dissemination of research findings seriously. As such it has developed this dedicated research series to publish all research sponsored by the SSDA.

**Lesley Giles**

**Director of Strategy and Research at the SSDA**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

The Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University has been commissioned by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) to undertake a qualitative evaluation of the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative. This interim report sets out the findings from the first phase of the evaluation, which took place between May-July 2007. It is based on a review of documentary evidence, interviews with key stakeholders and case studies with four Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) participating in the initiative.

The initiative is part of the Government's response to the Women and Work Commission's report *Shaping a Fairer Future* (2006). The overall aim is to test new recruitment and career pathways for 10,000 women in England into sectors with skills shortages and where women are under-represented.

In total, 9 SSCs are progressing projects under the initiative – Asset Skills, Automotive Skills, ConstructionSkills, Energy & Utility Skills, Improve, Lantra, SEMTA, Skillfast-UK and Skills for Logistics. A common theme that emerges from the SSCs taking the initiative forward is the existence of particular skill shortages and gaps within their sector, alongside an employment structure that demonstrates significant gender imbalance. The research undertaken by SSCs as a part of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) process highlighted these issues, particularly identifying skills shortages within higher level and technical occupations, and an under-representation of women within these roles.

In responding to the policy agenda, the SSCs have developed a range of projects to address the objectives of the initiative as a whole. The design of the projects reflect specific issues of skill gaps and shortages, along with the under utilisation of women in the workforce, that have been identified within each sector. The projects focus on the recruitment or career progression of female workers, or, in some cases, both of these aspects.

### Research findings

#### Process

The Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) was given responsibility for the development of the Women and Work Sector Pathways policy, and the SSDA was charged with its implementation. A steering group (chaired by DfES) was set up to oversee the development of the initiative.

A Policy Specification was drawn up by DfES with the scoping work beginning in May 2006 and the specification being finalised in July 2006. Key stakeholders were engaged early in the process which helped to develop a consensus at the outset and to incorporate various perspectives into the policy specification. The specification was seen by most stakeholders as a considerable accomplishment achieved over a relatively short timeframe and generally viewed as robust and fit for purpose. It sought to provide SSCs and employers with the flexibility to develop solutions that are appropriate for the sector and reflected the move towards a demand-led approach to training.

Bids for funding were reviewed against a pre-determined criteria with particular emphasis on the rationale underpinning the project, the targeting of the project, staffing and capacity, and evidence of employer engagement. After a 2 stage process, 9 bids were approved.

The overwhelming influences on the development of the initiative have been the targets and timeframe governing implementation. This has focussed activity on the establishment and delivery of the individual projects and placed the onus on the SSCs to deliver. At the time of the research, each SSC had designated or employed a project manager to oversee the planning and implementation of the project, identified and procured relevant training and education provision, engaged employers and individual learners, and had set up (or were in the process of setting up) administrative systems.

Some SSCs had chosen to effectively contract out the management of their projects, albeit often to individuals or groups with close links to the sector.

### **Partnership working**

As one might expect, partnership working is an integral part of the initiative. At the strategic level, key stakeholders were engaged through the steering group chaired by a representative of DfES and including the SSDA, the LSC, the Women and Work Unit and the Trades Union Congress. As the initiative has moved towards implementation, an operations group was established to oversee the process and to share good practice. The operations group includes representatives from DfES, SSDA, TUC and the SSCs implementing the pilot projects.

There was some enthusiasm amongst stakeholders for a greater role for trade unions within the initiative. For various reasons the unions have not played a significant role in implementation to date. However, there is a willingness on behalf of the trades unions to do so, and there is potentially a key role for Union Learning Representatives and union-based communication to play in supporting the implementation of the initiative.

The extent of partnership development activity and partnership working within each of the projects funded under the initiative is variable. Each of the SSCs putting forward proposals conducted consultations and undertook various partnership development activities in the early stages of the design and development of the intervention, usually involving consultations with at least some key employers in the sector and the relevant Trades Unions. All the stakeholders reported the limited time available for the development and delivery of the initiative as an influence on partnership activity. The main impact of this has been to focus activity on a small number of key players, be they government departments or agencies, employers, employer associations, existing sector groups or training providers, in order to deliver.

### **Employer and individual engagement**

Engaging employers and individual beneficiaries remains at the heart of the challenge associated with the initiative. The approach adopted by each of the case study projects seeks to engage the employer first and then bring individuals on board. This has brought many challenges and has proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Whilst a wide range of PR, advertising and marketing approaches is apparent, there is some consensus amongst those delivering the intervention that the most effective approach to engaging individual employers is through face to face contact either directly or through trusted intermediaries.

It is clear from the initial case studies that a straightforward message that connects with the employer and their interests, and minimises the complexities and bureaucracy associated with the delivery is most likely to attract attention. Communicating the financial benefits of undertaking subsidised training can prove to be an important factor in an employer's decision to support the initiative. However those working closely with employers including the intermediaries and the training providers delivering the projects, generally note that financial incentives are rarely sufficient on their own to engage employers, as few employers will undertake training for its own sake. The 'business case' for skills development activity may need to be made and supported at various levels of the organisation and this contributes to the resource and often time-consuming employer engagement process.

At the same time, several stakeholders pointed out that the ultimate potential beneficiaries of this initiative i.e. women, may be 'reluctant learners', and a further investment is required to engage individual learners once employers are engaged. Clearly there are social, cultural, economic and workplace inhibitors or barriers which need to be overcome to encourage individual women to come forward and undertake some training. The prevalence of these factors is variable, however, they clearly impact on the rate of progress and can take some time and effort to overcome.

The 'Personal Development Plan' or 'Individual Training Plan' is a key element of each of the case study projects. The process is important in gaining the commitment to the training on behalf of both the individual beneficiary and the employer and in providing a platform for further development in the future as well as a means of monitoring progress.



There was recognition amongst stakeholders involved in the delivery of the initiative that engaging employers remains a challenging arena. Stakeholders generally suggest that the long-term goal of employer attitudinal and cultural change towards women in the workplace remains some way away. However, there was some confidence that the established and emerging connections with employers would continue to develop and that these employers would support the transfer of practice to other employers operating in the sector.

### **Outputs and Impact**

Progress towards the initiative's headline target of supporting up to 10,000 women by testing new recruitment and career pathways has been mixed. Overall progress has been slower than anticipated as most elements of the design and development process – developing and agreeing SSC projects, establishing and delivering projects and engaging employers and individual beneficiaries - have taken longer than originally hoped for by policy planners and those involved in the implementation of the initiative.

At the strategic level there was broad agreement among stakeholders that the initiative addresses clearly and explicitly the agenda set in the original Women and Work Commission Report. All stakeholders agreed that the added value of the programme is likely to go beyond March 2008 and the (up to) 10,000 women who will participate in the initiative. The sheer scale of the programme and the various outcomes of the individual projects are expected to have an important and noticeable impact at a sectoral level.

At the time of reporting there is early evidence of some emerging impacts associated with the initiative. Without exception, the initiative has been welcomed by stakeholders and has galvanised real enthusiasm in terms of its focus on equality. The SSDA have embraced the opportunity to encourage the Skills for Business Network to take it forward, and have developed an approach, systems and procedures necessary to progress the work.

The SSCs have welcomed the initiative as providing a means of demonstrating to employers that they can make a practical contribution to their business. It has also provided a useful vehicle to demonstrate the value of the SSA process and as a means to connect with a wide range of employers.

### **Lessons learned to date**

The key lessons emerging from the initiative to date are highlighted below:

- Linkages between the initiative and other elements of the Women and Work Programme (i.e. skills coaches and level 3 pilots) have been made at a strategic level, but there is limited evidence to indicate that this is the case at an operational level. The extent to which such linkages would add value to the initiative is currently unclear.
- Joint working at the strategic level – for example occasional workshops or similar events involving senior representatives from SSDA, LSC and relevant government departments and agencies - can help to minimise duplication and encourage value adding activity at the operational level.
- A focus on the achievement of quantitative targets within a pilot programme can limit the extent of more long term partnership activity, innovation and value-adding activity.
- Involvement of SSCs in the early stages of the policy development process has supported the ownership of the initiative by the Skills for Business Network.
- The importance of the SSDA project manager in terms of making the links between policy and practice and both supporting and acting as a 'critical friend' to SSCs was widely recognised and valued.
- Proper resourcing of projects in terms of management (including recruitment and replacement due to staff turnover) and employer engagement activity is critical to taking the projects forward.



- Whilst some stakeholders such as the LSC and TUC are engaged to varying degrees at the strategic level, there is scope to improve their contribution at the operational level through, for example, connections with skills brokers and union learning representatives.
- Listening to employers and responding to their business interests provides a sound foundation for the design and implementation of an intervention. Minimising bureaucracy for employers is a key element in facilitating employer engagement and buy-in.
- The internal decision making processes of employers and their planning cycles can result in material delays in undertaking publicly funded training interventions and limit demand in the short term.
- Impacts of the initiative will take some time to emerge, will often be qualitative in nature and difficult to measure, involving developments such as changes in attitudes and organisational cultures.
- Stakeholders such as trade unions, employer organisations, government departments and agencies have a key role to play in promoting the initiative to their constituent groups. In particular, the initiative would benefit from active promotion at the strategic level from trade unions (to encourage 'bottom-up' demand from workers) and employer organisations (to press the 'business case' for employer involvement).
- There is scope to improve the links between the Sector Pathways Initiative and the other elements of the Women and Work programme in areas where it is relevant, and stakeholders – notably government departments and agencies - have a role to play in ensuring widespread awareness of the broad scope of the programme.
- Finally, stakeholder influence is important in ensuring that the broad strategic context and objectives of the initiative are kept in mind at a time when the achievement of short-term numerical targets is uppermost in the minds of project managers and delivery agents. This may be done, for example, through continued active involvement with steering group and related processes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University has been commissioned by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) to undertake a qualitative evaluation of the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative<sup>1</sup>. This interim report sets out the findings from the first phase of the qualitative evaluation based on a review of documentary evidence, interviews with key stakeholders and case studies with four Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) participating in the initiative.

The initiative is part of the Government's response to the Women and Work Commission's report *Shaping a Fairer Future* (2006). The overall aim of the initiative is to test new recruitment and career pathways for 10,000 women in England into sectors with skills shortages and where women are under-represented. Further details about the background to, and aims of, the initiative are presented in section 2.

The qualitative evaluation is a part of a broader Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative evaluation strategy. This also includes surveys of employers and participants, which are being undertaken by independent consultants IFF Research.

This report presents the interim findings from the qualitative evaluation, setting the context of the initiative and reporting on the first phase of the case studies. The quantitative surveys of employers and participants will be reported on separately. The aim of the qualitative evaluation is to assess the development, progress and early evidence of the impact of the initiative, supporting continuous improvement.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 – policy background and context
- Section 3 - details of the evaluation and methodology
- Section 4 - research findings to date
- Section 5 – main findings and implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to as 'the initiative' for the remainder of the report

## 2 POLICY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

### 2.1 Background – The Women and Work Commission

In February 2006 the Women and Work Commission published *Shaping a Fairer Future*, a report highlighting the persistent differences between occupations, career progression and salaries of men and women in the labour market. Identifying a pay gap of between 13-17 per cent between men and women who work full-time, a general under-valuing of 'women's jobs', and persistent occupational segregation<sup>2</sup>, the report put forward a series of 40 recommendations aimed at bringing about culture change and maximising the potential of women in the workforce. Included in the recommendations were a £20 million pilot package to enable women to change direction and progress in their jobs and careers through raising skill levels, and the development of programmes to link Train to Gain and SSCs in order to recruit and retain women into non-traditional jobs and to develop career paths for those working part-time. Responding to these recommendations, the Government Action Plan, published in September 2006, put forward proposals for the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative.

### 2.2 Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative

The initiative is part of a three part offer announced in the Chancellor's March 2006 Budget statement. The three parts were:

- To double the number of skills coaches and extend skills coaching to 11 Jobcentre Plus districts with a focus on low skilled women.
- To pay for an additional level 3 trial to support low skilled, part time and ethnic minority women.
- To test new recruitment and career pathways for 10,000 women in England into sectors with skills shortages where women are under-represented – the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative

The initiative has a series of short, medium and long term objectives. In the long-term, it is focussed on:

- Increasing the **entry and retention** levels of women into sectors, sub-sectors or occupations where they are currently under-represented and where there are specific skills gaps and shortages
- Increasing instances of **career progression** by women in sectors, sub-sectors and occupations where they are currently under-represented, and there are specific skills gaps and shortages
- Increasing the **earning potential** for women in sectors, sub-sectors and occupations where they are currently under-represented and there are specific skills gaps and shortages
- **Engaging employers in overcoming barriers faced by women** in the labour market whilst meeting their skill needs.

Each of the SSC projects is designed specifically to address one or more of these objectives. Each SSC project is made up of one or more 'strands' of training/development activity that are specifically aimed at addressing an identified need within the sector.

The SSDA and the SSCs were charged with taking the initiative forward. A process for developing and implementing the initiative was established, and this is reviewed in section 4.2 of this report.

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<sup>2</sup> Occupational segregation refers to the way in which women and men are concentrated in different areas of work. It can be horizontal (with women concentrated in particular sectors) and/or vertical (with women tending to be found at the lower levels of organisational hierarchies).

### 2.3 SSC context

In total, 9 SSCs are progressing the initiative – Asset Skills, Automotive Skills, ConstructionSkills, Energy & Utility Skills, Improve, Lantra, SEMTA, Skillfast-UK and Skills for Logistics.

A common theme emerging from the SSCs taking the initiative forward is the existence of particular skill shortages and gaps within their sector, alongside an employment structure that demonstrates significant gender imbalance. With the exception of Asset Skills and Skillfast-UK, women are under represented in each of the sectors. Furthermore, the occupations in which female employment is most common tend to be those characterised by low skill and low pay. Skills shortages within the higher level and technical or managerial occupations are frequently identified (eg Construction, Skillfast-UK, Asset Skills, Automotive Skills, Improve and SEMTA) and the under representation of women in these roles is also noted. Overall, there is a basic premise that the considerable potential amongst the female workforce that is currently being under-used could help to overcome identified skills shortages within each sector.

In responding to these issues, the SSCs have developed a range of projects. Table 2.1 shows the objectives of each of the individual projects and how they map onto the objectives of the initiative as a whole. The projects focus on the recruitment or the career progression of female workers, or, in some cases, both of these areas.

**Table 2.1: Objectives of SSC projects**

	Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative – key objectives / strands						
	Increasing entry and retention levels			Increasing career progression (increasing earnings potential)			Engaging employers
	Recruitment	Retention	Raising awareness	Skill needs analysis	Training / upskilling	Career progression	Culture change
Construction Skills	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Lantra					✓	✓	✓
Skillfast-UK					✓	✓	✓
Skills for Logistics	✓				✓	✓	✓
Asset Skills			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Automotive Skills	✓	✓			✓	✓	
EU Skills					✓	✓	
Improve Ltd					✓	✓	
SEMTA			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Policy Research Institute

### 3 EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Evaluation aims

The aims and objectives of the *overall* evaluation of the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative are to:

- Assess the impact of the initiative and whether it is effectively meeting the long-term policy objectives at sector level and achieving desired outcomes
- Review performance and monitoring information to monitor and understand developments in the initiative and to inform partners on progress against the long-term, medium-term and short-term objectives of the initiative
- Provide feedback to encourage the continuous improvement of the initiative throughout the lifecycle of the project. This will be achieved by identifying success factors and barriers to success and enabling shared learning for the project and for the longer term.

As noted above, the qualitative evaluation forms one part of the overall evaluation. This part of the evaluation has its own set of discrete, but related aims. These are:

- Familiarisation with the initiative and policy background
- Sectoral context
- Review of sectoral monitoring information
- Reporting on development, set-up and conditions of early stages and advising on improvements
- To report on further developments and indications of impact
- To facilitate shared learning
- To advise on the development of the evaluation overall.

An evaluation framework was developed in order to meet these aims and objectives. This is set out below.

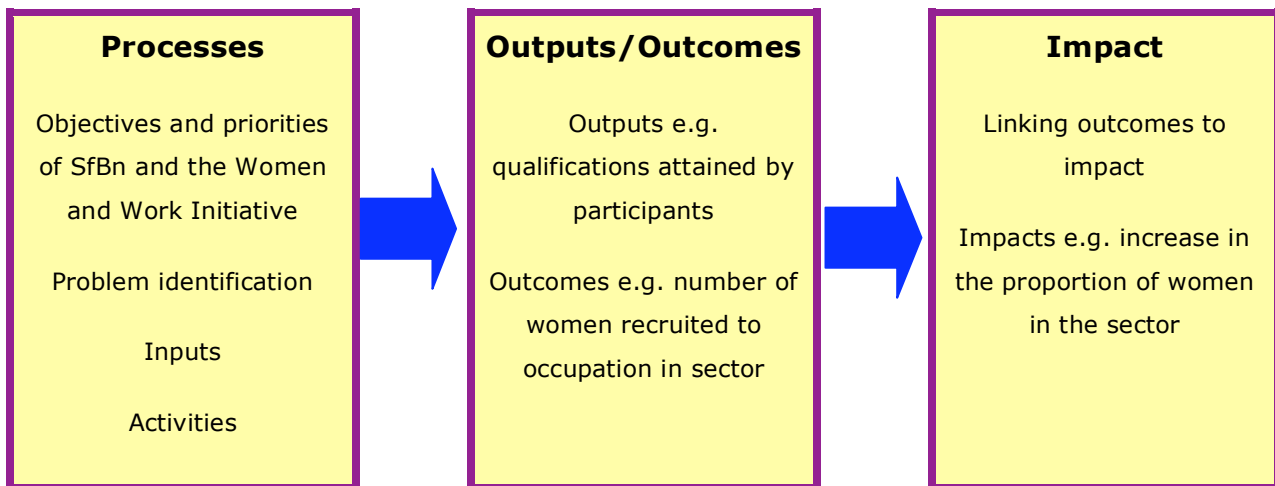
#### 3.2 Evaluation framework

The framework for the evaluation was developed to reflect the logic chain for the initiative that was identified by the SSDA. The logic chain identifies a number of stages in the development of the programme, all of which will require examination during the evaluation process. Key stages include:

- Objectives and priorities of the Skills for Business network and the Women and Work Initiative
- Problem identification
- Inputs
- Activities
- Outputs
- Outcomes
- Linking outcomes to impact
- Impacts.

These stages have been 'collapsed' to focus on three areas, namely: **processes, outputs/outcomes and impact**, as identified in the framework set out below. The framework is used as a basis for the structure of the research findings that follow in section 4.

Figure 3.1: Outline evaluation framework for the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative



### 3.3 Methodology

The qualitative evaluation consists of a two phase approach – phase 1, which followed developments up until July 2007, and phase 2 which will be undertaken in early 2008. This report presents the findings from phase 1 which involved the following activities:

- A **review of background literature and documentation** regarding the development and implementation of the initiative.
- A **review of the individual SSC project proposals**, examining, in particular, the linkages between Sector Skills Agreement priorities, identified skill shortages and the objectives of the initiative.
- Interviews with **key stakeholders**.
- **Case studies** of SSC projects.
- A **Learning Workshop** held with representatives of all of the SSCs undertaking projects as part of the initiative. The agenda for the Learning Workshop is presented in Annex 2.

#### 3.3.1 Stakeholder interviews

Interviews were undertaken with seven key stakeholders from organisations that are involved in the initiative. These included representatives from:

- Department for Education and Skills
- Learning and Skills Council
- SSDA
- Trades Union Congress
- Women and Equality Unit.

These interviews examined in detail: the development of the policy and its evolution from the findings of the Women and Work Commission; delivery of the initiative; and progress to date, including in relation to outputs and outcomes. The discussion guide for the interviews is attached in Annex 1.

#### 3.3.2 Case studies

Four SSCs were selected as case studies for phase 1 of the qualitative research. These were ConstructionSkills, Lantra, Improve and Skillfast-UKUK. A brief summary of each of their projects as they were at the time of the research (May - July 2007) is presented below.

### **ConstructionSkills**

There are three main strands to the ConstructionSkills project. The first looks at ways of recruiting and retaining women in the construction industry in 3 areas – crafts and trades, technical roles and professional and managerial roles - by linking industry to graduates studying for construction related degrees; the second looks at career changers, those women who take an interest in the sector later on in life (mid 20s to late 30s); and the third looks at 'upskilling', assisting those women already in the industry to support them in developing into higher levels of work in the 3 areas. At the outset of the project in November/December 2006 the key targets were to recruit 700 women with high level construction qualifications into the sector and to support 1,100 women already working in the sector to progress into higher skilled / higher level roles by March 2008.

The analysis underpinning the initiative relates mainly to the historical dearth of women in the sector. Women make up 30 per cent of the professional and management roles, 9 per cent of technical posts and only 1 per cent of craft and trades roles. Total female representation is 13 per cent of the labour force across the industry.

A Steering group for the project was being put in place at the time of the research. Along with ConstructionSkills and the Environmental Academy, membership of the Steering Group is likely to include representation from the National Skills Academy, three influential employers and the SSDA. The Environmental Academy is heavily involved with the initiative, liaising with employers to place individual recruits as environmental managers and then providing development routes into other areas of the industry, whilst also forging strong links with construction related subjects at a number of higher education partners in the North East of England.

### **Lantra**

Lantra is focused on environment and land-based industries, where there is generally an under-representation of women, although there are differences between sub-sectors. For example the equine sub-sector is female-dominated, but most of the land-based sub-sectors are male-dominated. There is therefore a need to address gender imbalances. The project, which commenced in November/December 2006, seeks to work with businesses to enable 600 women to progress into managerial and technical roles by March 2008.

The key actors in the project as well as Lantra are: training providers; employers, including for example Groundwork UK and the National Trust; and intermediary and stakeholder organisations including sector groups and trade unions.

Originally the project focused on supervisory management, but the scope was broadened to include leadership and supervisory management, technical skills and specialist issues such as health and safety, use of equipment and risk assessment. The Lantra on-line competency framework (OCF), which includes skills assessment, mentoring and modular training to address skill needs, is central to the project. Participants receive a certificate of attendance and they may complete a full or part NVQ, but this is not a required or essential element of the programme. The project fits into Lantra's approach to 'bite-sized learning', addressing specific individual and employer skill needs and issues.



### **Improve**

The focus of the Improve project is to support female operatives in obtaining a level 3 Introduction to Management qualification, enabling them to move into more senior and managerial roles. The project began in February 2007 and aims to provide training for 500 women by March 2008.

The project evolved from the findings of work undertaken for the Sector Skills Agreement which highlighted the gender imbalance within the sector. Approximately three quarters of employees are male, with the imbalance being most pronounced at managerial level – only 23 per cent of corporate managers and 17 per cent of managers and proprietors are female.

The project is managed by Improve, who appointed Cambridge Professional Academy to deliver the training. The project involves recruitment onto and training for the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Introduction to Management Course at level 3.

A series of assumptions have been made that underpin the project – if 500 women achieve management level qualifications then this will have an impact in terms of progression and earning power for the individuals; and businesses will find it easier to recruit at management level. One of the key objectives identified in the project proposal is for 65 per cent of those undertaking training to progress to a supervisory/management role within one year of completing the training.

### **Skillfast-UK**

Skillfast-UK has developed two broad strands to progress the initiative. One strand seeks to support recruitment and to develop a new entrant route for fashion design graduates into the sector. The other strand, which forms the focus for the case study, seeks to work with operatives, administration and technical staff in the sector to improve their position in the labour market and increase progression into supervisory, managerial and technical roles. Both strands began in November/December 2006, with the second one aiming to support 380 women by March 2008.

The analysis underpinning the development and implementation of the Sector Skills Agreement highlights the contribution of the sector (employing 384,000 people and generating £10bn) to the national economy and provides details of its workforce characteristics. The overall workforce is split evenly between male and female workers. There is, however, considerable occupational segregation with women underrepresented in higher level occupations such as managers, and overrepresented in lower level occupations such as operatives.

Skillfast-UK provide the strategic direction for the project and have also provided guidance and support for the development of marketing and communications associated with the project. The intervention is delivered by a small management consultancy with an extensive knowledge and background of the sector and the work of Sector Skills Councils.

The project seeks to test new methods of engaging women and employers in the development of skills that will accelerate career progression, providing the sector with a range of business solutions and improved career pathways for women. Delivery of the project involves a five step process which includes identification of the skill needs of the business and individual employees; the development of a training recommendations report and individual training plans for each female beneficiary; and subsequent delivery of appropriate training.

The case studies involved a review of relevant documentation, interviews with those delivering the strand (including the SSCs and training providers) and, where possible, interviews with beneficiaries, including employers and employees. Some of the projects are still at a relatively early stage and, therefore, beneficiary interviews are limited in these cases.

Case studies were selected in order to include a range of sectors and of different project types. More specifically, case study selection took into account the following factors:

- Potential progress of the project. Phase 1 of the case studies focussed on projects that were approved in November 2006, rather than January 2007. The exception to this is the Improve project, which anticipated a significant number of beneficiaries at a relatively early stage of the project. Other projects that were approved in January 2007 will be covered during phase 2 of the research.
- The different strands of activity covered by each project i.e.:
  - Increasing entry and retention levels
  - Increasing career progression of women
  - Increasing women’s earnings potential
  - Engaging employers to overcome barriers faced by women employees
 Selection of the case studies sought to ensure that each of the strands were covered.
- The number of individuals likely to benefit from the project. The projects selected anticipated around 2,400 individual beneficiaries in their project proposals.

Details of the interviews undertaken for each case study are presented in Table 3.1 below.

**Table 3.1: Case study interviews**

SSC	Interviews completed
Construction	2 SSC representatives 1 training provider 1 employer
Improve	4 SSC representatives 1 training provider 2 employers 4 individual beneficiaries
Lantra	2 SSC representatives 1 employer 2 individual beneficiaries
Skillfast	1 SSC representative 1 subcontracted delivery agent 2 training providers 3 employers

**Source: Policy Research Institute**

Interviews with the SSCs and others delivering the projects covered issues relating to project objectives, delivery and progress; whilst those with beneficiaries covered motivation for involvement, satisfaction with, and impact of the project. Discussion guides are presented in Annex 1.

The following sections of the report focus on the research findings emerging to date to consider the progress of the initiative and its emerging impact.

## **4 RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section of the report is based on the findings emerging from the qualitative interviews with strategic stakeholders, those involved in the development and delivery of the 4 case study projects, including several training providers, employers and beneficiaries. The findings are also informed by the views of various stakeholders involved in the Operations Group overseeing the implementation of the initiative collected via a Learning Workshop which was designed to encourage reflection and sharing of good practice.

It is important to note that the findings reflect the fact that this is an interim report, and that all the projects under review were at a relatively early stage of implementation at the time of the fieldwork (which took place in May-July 2007).

### **4.2 Process**

#### **4.2.1 Policy specification**

The Department for Education and Skills (now Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) was given responsibility for the development of the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative policy and SSDA was charged with its implementation. A Steering Group (chaired by DfES) was set up to oversee the development of the policy and included representatives drawn from key stakeholders including the Women and Equality Unit, SSDA, Learning and Skills Council and Trades Union Congress. Detailed discussions were held by the key stakeholders involved in the design of the initiative to determine an appropriate policy model and approach to implementation.

A Policy Specification was drawn up by DfES with the scoping work beginning in May 2006 and the specification being finalised in July 2006. Key stakeholders were engaged early in the process which helped to develop a consensus at the outset and to incorporate various perspectives into the policy specification. The specification was seen by most stakeholders as a considerable accomplishment achieved over a relatively short timeframe and generally viewed as 'robust' and 'fit for purpose'. It sought to provide SSCs and employers with the flexibility to develop solutions that are appropriate for the sector and reflected the move towards a demand-led approach to training.

However a number of issues presented key challenges to the specification and further development of the initiative particularly in terms of:

- Policy requirements
- Ensuring positive action (and not discrimination)
- State Aid Issues

#### **4.2.2 Policy requirements**

The headline target for the Women & Work Sector Initiative was to test new recruitment pathways for 10,000 women and women returners. The initiative was time-bound, with funding due to end in March 2008. However the initial conception, focussed on recruitment, was subsequently expanded to include aspects of career development for women already working in specific sectors in recognition of both horizontal and vertical segregation. Four target groups were identified as potential beneficiaries of the initiative where:

- Women are under-represented across the sector as a whole
- Women are under-represented in specific sub-sectors within a sector
- Women are under-represented in specific occupations in a sector
- Women are concentrated in low skilled/low paid jobs within a sector

The stretching targets associated with the initiative became more apparent and widely recognised as the development of the initiative progressed. There are a number of factors contributing to this including:

- The short implementation timescale (to be developed and delivered by March 2008)
- The resources required to deliver employed-led projects has meant that that unit costs are higher than would originally have been envisaged.

Through discussion and negotiation the original targets have been revised downwards to support in the region of 7,000 women over the period of the intervention. This revised target and the expectations for the programme more generally in terms of cultural change is still viewed as a challenging one by all the stakeholders contributing to the evaluation research, given the innovative nature of the initiative and the challenge of facilitating cultural change.

A further issue to be reconciled was associated with the level and nature of employer match funding. Initially Treasury expected a 50:50 cash match; however, given the nature of the intervention, targeting a hard to reach group through employers, a mixture of cash and in-kind matching was negotiated.

Another concern was associated with minimising duplication with existing initiatives, notably Train to Gain, and establishing connections with the wider Women and Work Programme. These were discussed at some length at the strategic level and this was taken forward through the policy specification and the bidding process (see section 4.25).

### **4.2.3 Positive Action**

The initiative had to ensure that it was taking positive action and was in no way discriminatory. Positive action seeks to address the effects of past discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of gender. The policy specification indicates that

We are undertaking the Women and Work Sector Pathways initiative as a positive action initiative, as permitted by s47 Sex Discrimination Act 1975, as amended. It is imperative that all initiatives undertaken by partner organisations fall within the positive action measures permitted by that Act, and that none unlawfully discriminates or instructs anyone to do so, in implementing these proposals.

The DfES legal team advised the SSSA that they should develop detailed guidance on positive action. However, on advice from the Equal Opportunities Commission it was agreed that SSCs would be referred to the detailed guidance on the EOC website and would have access to an EOC adviser for any specific queries or advice.

### **4.2.4 State Aid**

The issue of State Aid arose subsequent to the development of the policy specification. State Aid relates to EC rules about government funding for commercial enterprises which may lead to giving those enterprises a competitive advantage over their peers in other countries. This was not a consideration during the period of the development of the policy specification because it was not felt to apply to the initiative. However the DTI subsequently raised State Aid as a potential issue. This added to the uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the initiative (which was by this time underway) and involved considerable time and effort to resolve.

### **4.2.5 Bidding**

The SSSA developed and coordinated the process to establish Skills for Business Network projects to take the initiative forward. A Steering Group was established to oversee the implementation of the initiative including representatives from DfES, SSSA, Women and Equality Unit, Learning and Skills Council and the Trade Union Congress.

The Skills for Business Network, comprising 25 SSCs, were invited to put together proposals to take the initiative forward. The bids were reviewed by the Steering Group against pre-determined criteria with particular emphasis on the rationale underpinning the project, the targeting of the project, staffing and capacity and evidence of employer engagement. 16 SSCs submitted initial project outlines. The SSSA project manager for the initiative worked with the SSCs to develop more comprehensive and targeted proposals.

There was an initial preference to establish a small number of 'larger' projects to deliver the programme as this was seen to be the most effective mechanism to take the initiative forward and to achieve the targets for the initiative. However this was not possible given the size of the projects put forward for consideration by the SSCs. The SSDA worked with the SSCs to develop the conceptualisation of the projects with a focus on attaining quality interventions with realistic expectations. Considerable effort was made by those designing the initiative and those seeking to implement it to ensure that value was added to existing provision and the prospect of displacement was minimised. For example the Improve bid was originally developed to provide management training for women at level 2; however at the bid assessment stage the overlap with Train to Gain provision was recognised and the proposal was revised to support progression, providing management training at level 3.

Four projects (ConstructionSkills, Lantra, Skillfast-UK, Skills for Logistics) were successful in obtaining funding to take the initiative forward at this point in time (November/December 2006).

As it became clear that the Skills for Business Network needed to expand its contribution to meet the policy aspirations for the initiative, a second call for proposals was announced in September 2006, bids were assessed in November and contracts signed in January<sup>3</sup>. The SSDA sought to provide further support and guidance for SSCs interested in submitting a proposal. SSDA worked with several SSCs that had expressed an interest in taking the initiative forward to develop the proposals with a focus on ensuring quality and realistic project bids. Five further projects were funded at this stage (Asset Skills, Automotive Skills, EU Skills, Improve Ltd, SEMTA) and commenced by March 2007.

The stakeholders interviewed during Stage 1 of this evaluation reflected on the bidding process and generally concluded that the initial response of the SSCs to the invitation to put forward projects to be funded through the initiative was 'disappointing'. This was felt to be due both to the number (although in fact two in three SSCs put forward potential projects) and the variable quality of the bids. The second call for proposals helped to increase the number of projects funded and the proactive support provided through the SSDA project manager was generally recognised to have been an important factor in improving the quality of the proposals.

A number of factors appeared to have influenced the number and quality of the bids put forward by the SSCs. Two factors appear to have been particularly influential (i) the existence of Sector Skills Agreements and (ii) the general demands of the system.

The Sector Skills Agreements played an important role in providing the evidence of skills gaps and shortages and targeting the initiative on these. SSCs that had been able to develop their SSAs were in a much stronger position to be able to marshal the evidence to support a proposal than SSCs that were in the early stages of SSA development. Stakeholders within the SSCs report the evidence underpinning the SSA as an important input in the design and development of the intervention.

A further important factor influencing the number of SSCs putting forward proposals under the initiative is the volume of policy developments SSCs are responding to, whilst at the same time pursuing an established agenda. These demands clearly have implications for the capacity of SSCs to respond to initiatives such as this one as they make strategic choices relating to the allocation of limited resources at a point in time.

Notwithstanding these circumstances, the vast majority of the stakeholders both at the strategic level and within the Skills for Business Network contributing to the evaluation research suggested that the bidding process had been very effective in developing some innovative, realistic and achievable projects to take the initiative forward. However the time taken to translate initial proposals into

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<sup>3</sup> Only one contract (Energy & Utility Skills) was delayed due to a redefinition of the offer, and this contract was signed in March.



agreed projects and to draw up contracts had taken longer than originally anticipated in most instances.

#### **4.2.6 Establishing and delivering projects**

A key characteristic of the initiative is the wide range of approaches being adopted to deliver the projects underpinning the implementation of the initiative. At the strategic level the initiative has been influenced by the aspiration to make connections with the other two strands of the Women and Work Programme. However there is almost universal recognition that the operational links are relatively weak at this point in time. Individual projects funded under the initiative are focussing on the delivery of the interventions and, as recognised by the Women and Work Commission 'one year on' report<sup>4</sup>, links between individual projects and other strands may not be practicable for all projects.

The overwhelming influences on the development of the initiative have been the targets and timeframe governing implementation. This has focussed activity on the establishment and delivery of the projects and placed the onus on the SSCs to deliver. At the time of the research, each SSC had designated or employed a project manager to oversee the planning and implementation of the project and most had identified and procured relevant training and education provision, engaged employers and individual learners and had set up or were in the process of setting up administrative systems. Some SSCs had chosen to effectively contract out the management of their projects, albeit often to individuals or groups with close links to the sector. There were clearly advantages to be realised from this approach, as evidenced in the case of Skillfast-UK for example, where the sub-contractor had a network of associates with longstanding links with many employers working in the sector. However some stakeholders contributing to the Learning Workshop undertaken as a part of this research raised concerns associated with this such as potential loss of direct control, difficulties associated with managing at a distance, risk of non-delivery and in some cases limited knowledge of the sector.

Experiences associated with the process of establishing and delivering individual projects have been diverse. For example, ConstructionSkills had been undergoing a period of internal restructuring and re-organisation and this has impacted adversely on the establishment and progress of the initiative funded projects. The original proposal was subject to review and revised methodologies and delivery plans have subsequently been developed. Improve adopted a relatively simple approach to delivery which has involved relatively few resources to establish and deliver. A small group including the project manager, operations manager, commercial director and administrative support established and currently oversee the delivery of the project, holding meetings with the single provider (see below) as appropriate. Skillfast-UK and Lantra adopt more complex delivery models seeking to provide bespoke learning to employers. The management structures however are different. In the case of Lantra, the project is managed by a relatively small in-house team, with significant responsibility for engaging with employers and devising learning programmes devolved to a group of providers including colleges, private sector organisations and sizeable employers such as local authorities and Groundwork-UK. In the case of Skillfast-UK, the project is managed by a management consultancy working with a team of Associates responsible for engaging employers and facilitating access to appropriate training opportunities.

A striking feature of the initiative is that each SSC has developed its own intervention and approach to delivering the projects funded under the initiative. This is usefully illustrated by the different approaches adopted by Improve Ltd and Skillfast-UK.

Improve Ltd have contracted with a single training provider to recruit onto and deliver training for the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Introduction to Management Course at level 3. The intervention involves the development of an individual training plan setting out the commitment of the employer and the employee and delivery through a combination of computer mediated learning, course materials and a two day workshop delivered in-house to

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<sup>4</sup> Women and Work Commission (2007) *Towards a Fairer Future*

where there are sufficient learners in one employer or public venues where this is not the case.

In contrast to this approach, Skillfast-UK have established a network of Associates to engage employers, understand employer skills needs, develop training plans for individual women beneficiaries, provide advice and guidance on appropriate training providers and monitor and review delivery. A wide range of training providers chosen by the company (with the agreement of the Associate) underpin the delivery of the project. The training provided is very varied and led by the interest of the employers but crucially it is all aimed at supporting the career progression of women employees. The training is delivered at the employer premises or off-site, dependent upon the nature of the training.

Both single and multiple provider models have their advantages and disadvantages, however stakeholders generally agree that having a wide range of providers is preferable if they are better able to meet employers' needs as it can add to both the number of routes to engage employers and the scope of provision.

A further point to note is that this initiative is a relatively new development for the Skills for Business Network and it has brought new challenges to the network. The contracting process is reported to have been a considerable undertaking and took longer than anticipated by SSDA and national stakeholders. Furthermore the development of administration and monitoring procedures has proved to be a challenging and resource intensive process. At the heart of the design of the process has been a wish to minimise the bureaucratic burden on employers often associated with interventions of this type whilst retaining audit trails and collecting the evidence necessary to ensure that public money is being spent wisely.

#### **4.2.7 Partnership working**

As one might expect partnership working is an integral part of the initiative. At the strategic level key stakeholders were engaged through the Steering Group chaired by a representative of DfES and includes the SSDA, LSC, Women and Work Unit and the Trades Union Congress.

As the initiative has moved towards implementation, an Operations Group was also established to oversee the process and to share good practice. The Operations Group is chaired by the SSDA and is lead by the SSCs implementing the pilot projects.

The extent of partnership development activity and partnership working is variable within each of the projects funded under the initiative. Each of the SSCs putting forward proposals conducted consultations and undertook various partnership development activities in the early stages of the design and development of the intervention, usually involving consultations with at least some key employers in the sector and the relevant Trades Unions.

Subsequently partnerships and collaborative working have developed to varying degrees in each project, largely contingent upon the approach adopted by the individual projects. For example Improve undertook early stage consultations with the Trade Union (TGWU) and some large employers in the formative stages of the project with little further partnership working activity undertaken as the project has progressed. In contrast Skillfast-UK, following initial consultations, has gone on to establish an ongoing steering group to oversee delivery of the project. The Steering Group comprises Skillfast-UK, the subcontracted Project Manager, Trade Union (Community), two Trade Associations, three influential employers and the SSDA. The project also hosts a further 'provider steering group' to engage Associates and representatives from influential training providers in a process of review and further development.

All the stakeholders reported the limited time available for the development and delivery of the initiative as an influence on partnership activity. The main impact of this has been to focus activity on a small number of key players, be they government departments or agencies, employers, employer associations, existing sector groups or training providers, in order to deliver the initiative. Most stakeholders recognised this as a condition of the environment and demonstrated an overwhelmingly



pragmatic and positive response to this. However one or two stakeholders suggested that, given more time, the initiative may have been further developed through, for example, collaborative bids between SSCs and/or a greater opportunity for Union involvement than has been the case to date. The views of stakeholders within SSCs also reflect a desire to engage with the trade unions more effectively and various trade unions themselves have recognised this and are currently taking steps to become more active partners within the initiative.

#### **4.2.8 Employer and individual engagement**

Engaging employers and individual beneficiaries remains at the heart of the challenge associated with the initiative. The approach adopted by each of the case study projects seeks to engage the employer first and then bring individuals on board. This has brought many challenges and has proved to be more difficult than anticipated. SSCs themselves have limited resources to engage employers directly, for example Lantra has a core team of six people marketing and promoting the initiative, with intermediaries and training providers playing a crucial role in engaging employers and working with them to develop bespoke programmes for their women employees. Whilst a wide range of PR, advertising and marketing approaches is apparent, there is some consensus amongst those delivering the intervention that the most effective approach to engaging individual employers is through face to face contact.

It is clear from the initial case studies that a straightforward message that connects with the employer and their interests and minimises the complexities and bureaucracy associated with the delivery is most likely to attract employer interest. Communicating the financial benefits of undertaking subsidised training can prove to be an important factor in an employer's decision to support the initiative.

However those working closely with employers including the intermediaries and the training providers delivering the projects, generally note that financial incentives are rarely sufficient on their own to engage employers, as few employers will undertake training for its own sake. Most employers will undertake training to support the development of the business in one way or another and the case studies provide examples of the proactive approach adopted by intermediaries seeking to raise awareness and make the connection between employer interests and the development of the skills of their workforce. One of the employers engaging with Skillfast-UK reported

'our preference was for three hour sessions on a Friday Afternoon on a range of issues to support the development of 8-10 women who have been identified through our Training Needs Analysis or the staff appraisal system as having potential to progress. We were able to pick and choose the sessions we wanted which included introducing change management, promoting a discrimination free workplace, communication, problem solving and recognising and resolving stress related issues. They are delivered by several different training providers who have been very good'

The 'business case' for skills development activity may need to be made and supported at various levels of the organisation and this contributes to the resource and often time-consuming employer engagement process. Even when the case for training is made and accepted, employers may take some time 'to come on board' and support the training of women in the workplace. Employers have their own timeframes for training activity which may be dependent upon production schedules or cycles of demand at various times during the year which can lead to delays in enrolments or availability for training. These factors clearly impact on the progress of employer engagement within an initiative to be delivered over a relatively short timeframe such as this one.

At the same time several stakeholders pointed out that the ultimate potential beneficiaries of this initiative (i.e. women) may be 'reluctant learners' and a further investment is required to engage individual learners once employers are engaged. Clearly there are social, cultural, economic and workplace inhibitors or barriers which need to be overcome to encourage individual women to come forward and undertake some training. For example, an employer participating in the Improve project suggested that some women may have excluded themselves from the training because they did not consider 'management' training to be appropriate for them. The prevalence of these factors is

variable, however they clearly impact on the rate of progress and can take some time and effort to overcome.

Those delivering the projects funded under the initiative highlighted the need to be able to engage individual women in discussions about their skills development activity. The 'Personal Development Plan' or 'Individual Training Plan' is a key element of each of the case study projects. The process is important in gaining the commitment to the training on behalf of both the individual beneficiary and the employer and in providing a platform for further development in the future as well as a means of monitoring progress.

There was some enthusiasm amongst stakeholders for a greater role for trade unions within the initiative. As noted previously, for various reasons the unions have not played a significant role in the implementation of the initiative to date. However there is a willingness on behalf of the trades unions to do so and there is potentially a key role for Union Learning Representatives and union based communication to play in supporting the implementation of the initiative.

There was recognition amongst stakeholders involved in the delivery of the initiative that engaging employers remains a challenging arena. Stakeholders generally suggest that the long-term goal of 'employer cultural change' towards women in the workplace remains some way away. However there was some confidence that the established and emerging connections with employers would continue to develop and that these employers would support the transfer of practice to other employers.

Nevertheless, the potential tension between the aspirations of employers and employees is also worth recognising. There is evidence from the stakeholders working with employers that whilst employers may not have much interest in qualifications, individuals may be looking for them and value them far more. Realising and reconciling this tension is a considerable challenge for those seeking to promote accredited learning in the workplace within the context of employer-led intervention.

The initiative, particularly in the sectors covered by Skillfast-UK and Lantra was seen to be providing the supply-side with the flexibility to provide non-accredited training interventions that were wanted by employers and which were not funded through mainstream provision. However there was general agreement from those involved in the delivery of the initiative that the short-term nature of the funding was likely to limit the extent to which it could be used as a catalyst for employer engagement and cultural change.

#### **4.2.9 SSC Evaluation of Progress**

The initiative is subject to evaluation both in terms of the SSDA commissioned qualitative work underpinning this report and in terms of quantitative research to be conducted with employers and individual beneficiaries. Stakeholders within the SSCs suggested that whilst some monitoring and review activity was being undertaken there was little specific evaluation activity being undertaken by individual SSCs at a project level at the time of the case study research. The expectation generally was that the evaluations commissioned by the SSDA should provide sufficient evidence of performance and further information to inform the development of the intervention at the project level.

### **4.3 Outputs**

The number of individual and employer participants engaged with each of the case study projects at the time of the research is shown in Table 4.1. Progress towards the initiative's headline target of supporting up to 10,000 women by testing new recruitment and career pathways has been mixed. Overall progress at the time of the research had been slower than anticipated, in part because most elements of the design and development process – developing and agreeing SSC projects, establishing and delivering projects and engaging employers and individual beneficiaries - had taken longer than hoped for by policy planners and those involved in the implementation of the initiative. The number of individual and employer participants at July 2007 is outlined in table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Number of individual and employer participants, July 2007**

SSC	Participants	Employers
ConstructionSkills	0	0
Improve	249	66
Lantra	169	60
Skillfast-UK	308	28

*Source: SSDA*

Only Skillfast-UK was exceeding its original expectations in terms of the numbers of women it was supporting. The SSDA continue to monitor the situation and work with SSCs more generally to meet these challenges.

#### 4.4 Impact

At the strategic level there was broad agreement among stakeholders that the initiative addresses clearly and explicitly the agenda set in the original Women and Work Commission Report. All stakeholders agreed that the added value of the programme is likely to go beyond March 2008 and the (up to) 10,000 women who will participate in the initiative. The sheer scale of the programme and the various outcomes of the individual projects are expected to have an important and noticeable impact at a sectoral level.

At the time of reporting there is early evidence of some emerging impacts associated with the initiative. Without exception, the initiative has been welcomed by stakeholders and has galvanised real enthusiasm in terms of its focus. SSDA have embraced the opportunity to encourage the Skills for Business Network to take it forward and have developed an approach, systems and procedures necessary to take an initiative like this forward.

The SSCs have welcomed the initiative as providing a means of demonstrating to employers that they can make a difference to provision. It has also provided a useful vehicle to demonstrate the value of the SSA process and as a means to connect with a wide range of employers.

The participating SSCs have demonstrated a willingness to work together and share experiences and practice between each other and with the wider infrastructure through both the Operational Group and less formal collaboration. The Operational Group has provided a means for the SSCs and other influential stakeholders to come together and has been valued by participants. It has provided a forum to discuss both emerging policy issues influencing the initiative as well as practical operational issues and to undertake joint-problem solving. There is evidence of further connections being made between stakeholders as part of ongoing delivery activity which has involved sharing good practice in terms of, for example, marketing and promotion, employer engagement and administrative systems.

The pressure to meet the targets associated with the initiative has overwhelmingly led to an initial focus on working with employers and individuals who would provide the 'quick wins' necessary to establish the initiative and provide some evidence of progress. However stakeholders involved in the delivery of the initiative also report some success in terms of engaging both employers and individual learners who would be viewed as 'hard to reach' by policy planners – those organisations which would not normally become involved in initiatives which sought to provide external training for their employees and those individuals who would not normally undertake training activity for example.

Considerable effort has been made to establish administration systems that minimise bureaucracy yet meet the requirements for monitoring and compliance with regulations, with the approach adopted by Lantra being seen as an example of good practice in this regard. In particular there has been an emphasis on minimising the bureaucratic burden on employers and training providers which appears to be universally welcomed by both parties. Employers have not only been involved as consumers of the initiative but have played an active part in its design and development. For example the three employers on the Skillfast-UK Steering Group played a key role in informing the design and development of the delivery model and provided an opportunity to test out the intervention in a friendly environment.

Sustainability issues were considered as part of the bidding process, however the primary focus of the SSCs at the time of the research was placed on project delivery. A key point raised by several stakeholders is that much depends on the extent to which the initiative succeeds in contributing to culture change amongst employers particularly in the context of a wider need to reinforce the 'learning pays' message more generally. Following on from this, whilst other sources may provide some funding to take the individual projects forward, stimulating the development of motivations, systems or processes in employers which encourage them to invest their own resources in the development of their women employees will be a key factor in relation to sustainability.

The feedback from employers and individual beneficiaries is limited at this point in time, however there are indications of favourable impressions on behalf of employers in terms of the training provided through the initiative and from women in terms of improved skills and confidence.

#### **4.5 Lessons Learned to date**

Generally the Stakeholders involved in the development of the initiative were positive about it, in spite of its relatively slow start and challenging timebound targets. The key lessons emerging from the initiative to date are highlighted below:

- Linkages between the initiative and other elements of the Women and Work Programme (i.e. skills coaches and level 3 pilots) have been made at a strategic level, but there is limited evidence to indicate that this is the case at an operational level. The extent to which such linkages would add value to the initiative is currently unclear.
- Joint working at the strategic level – for example occasional workshops or similar events involving senior representatives from SSDA, LSC and relevant government departments and agencies - can help to minimise duplication and encourage value adding activity at the operational level
- A focus on the achievement of quantitative targets within a pilot programme can limit the extent of more long term partnership activity, innovation and value-adding activity
- Involvement of SSCs in the early stages of the policy development process has supported the ownership of the initiative by the Skills for Business Network.
- The importance of the SSDA project manager in terms of making the links between policy and practice and both supporting and acting as a 'critical friend' to SSCs was widely recognised and valued.
- Proper resourcing of projects in terms of project management (including recruitment and replacement due to staff turnover) and employer engagement activity is critical to taking the projects forward
- Whilst some stakeholders such as the LSC and TUC are engaged to varying degrees at the strategic level, there is scope to improve their contribution at the operational level through, for example, skills brokers and union learning representatives.
- Listening to employers and responding to their business interests provides a sound foundation for the design and implementation of an intervention. Minimising bureaucracy for employers is a key element in facilitating employer engagement
- The internal decision making processes of employers and their planning cycles can result in material delays in undertaking publicly funded training interventions and limit demand, particularly in the short term
- Impacts of the initiative will take some time to emerge, will often be qualitative in nature and difficult to measure, involving developments such as changes in attitudes and organisational cultures.

## **5 MAIN FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Inevitably this phase 1 evaluation has focused primarily on reviewing the process of getting the projects started and their initial operation. The early stage of the research and the qualitative nature of the investigation means that it is not possible at this stage to make many judgements about the impact of the initiative. However, a number of key findings emerged regarding the process of establishing and developing the individual projects that have potential implications for the operation of the programme up to the end of its funding period.

### **5.1 Operationalising the initiative**

All the stakeholders suggested that the initiative has led to the establishment of a set of projects in tune with the policy direction set by the Women and Work Commission. The initiative crystallised into a programme based on three objectives (i) increasing entry and retention levels, (ii) increasing career progression (iii) engaging employers to overcome barriers faced by women. The first objective is nearest to the original emphasis of the budget announcement, however the evidence and practicalities suggested the second stream as an equally important factor in taking the Women and Work Commission Agenda forward. The third objective was largely seen as a longer-term outcome associated with wider cultural change and an intended outcome emerging at some time in the future from the interventions funded under stream (i) and (ii).

The Sector Skills Agreements played a key role in providing evidence of the need for intervention, enabling SSCs to identify skills gaps and skills shortages to be addressed at sector and sub-sector level, and providing a rationale for intervention which underpinned the proposals put forward by the SSCs. The design of the projects has been influenced by both the SSAs and often by key employers being engaged in the development process. In this way the initiative provides a good illustration of a demand-led approach to skills policy which the government continues to strive towards post-Leitch.

### **5.2 SSC engagement with employers**

The vast majority of respondents agreed that engaging employers is central to the success of the initiative. The time-limited nature of the funding means that it is necessary to achieve this engagement quickly, encouraging SSCs to concentrate initially on employers with which they already have some contact and/or are likely to be responsive to the initiative. The challenging nature of the numerical targets for individual participation provide an incentive for SSCs to concentrate on larger employers that can – in principle – ‘deliver’ large numbers of participants.

There are some indications that the strategy of concentrating on large employers has not always resulted in the expected outcomes. Internal communication within large organisations may be slow and may not be effective in spreading the initiative’s message. Many large organisations also have established training programmes linked to equal opportunities and/or positive action programmes.

On the other hand, small employers tend to take more work to engage in the first place and may only be able to ‘deliver’ small numbers of participants. However, decision-making processes within small organisations tend to be straightforward. Respondents emphasised the key role of intermediaries such as training providers and sector organisations in encouraging SME participation in the programme.

The project case studies revealed examples of relatively large organisations engaging with SSCs for the first time as a result of the initiative, beginning to think about getting involved with other SSC programmes and recommending the initiative to other employers. While it is too early to assess how common this is, it is clear that the initiative does have the potential to act as a ‘shop window’ for SSCs.

The above discussion may imply that, of necessity, SSCs are pursuing strategies that may mean that ‘hard to reach’ employers and/or individuals are being given less attention than those with which the SSC already has links. On the other hand, the research did identify examples of extensive marketing and PR campaigns, engaging partners such as trade unions and sector bodies and making use of



various media. It is too early to draw conclusions about this, but it is clearly an issue that will require attention during phase 2 and the planned quantitative surveys of employers and individuals.

There was no evidence from the phase 1 evaluation research that the requirement for employers to make a financial contribution has had a negative effect on employer engagement and that the public funding provided through the initiative is clearly an important factor in successful employer engagement.

### **5.3 Delivery mechanisms**

One factor highlighted as an attraction of the initiative to employers is the potential flexibility of skills delivery in terms of time period (within the overall timeframe of the project), type of training supported, method of delivery and training provider. In particular, several respondents noted the fact that initiative support does not necessarily imply the need for a qualification seems to be a positive in the eyes of many employers. Having said this, some initiative projects have decided to focus on qualifications and/or provide a relatively structured training programme.

It appears from the evidence to date that SSCs have tended to work with existing partners and/or delivery agencies, primarily due to the need to establish the programme quickly, but also on the basis of trust and the fact that existing providers tend to be familiar with the sector and have links with employers.

### **5.4 Numbers v additionality and sustainability**

It is clear from the research to date that the overriding preoccupation of SSCs running initiative projects is with achieving numerical targets for participants and attempting to keep up with agreed profiles. One possible implication of this is that the additionality and sustainability aspects of the programme may be given less attention that might be desirable. This is because, as noted above, there may be a temptation to target organisations that are most likely to deliver the numbers and possibly individuals who might in any case have received training. Again, the early evidence is not sufficiently strong to draw firm conclusions at this stage; phase 2 of the case studies will need to address it in more detail.

A further issue relates to sustainability. All of the available evidence, and the response to this research, suggests that changing the position of women in the labour market is a long term process that involves the removal of structural barriers (such as skills) and changes in behaviour and culture on the part of employers in particular. The evidence to date confirms the potential of the initiative to begin to address some of these cultural issues, but there is a danger that concentration on short-term numerical targets may hamper attempts to work with employers so that they 'take ownership' of the issue and invest their own resources into improving the position of women in their workforces.

### **5.5 Administration, accountability and evaluation**

The potentially negative impact on employer engagement of complex administrative procedures was noted as a concern by a number of respondents, although the research found no direct evidence that perceived excessive bureaucracy had deterred employers from participating in the initiative. On the contrary, we found examples of SSCs making considerable efforts to 'shield' employers from the paperwork while ensuring the need for transparency and accountability.

Considerable progress has been made in the establishment of administrative and monitoring systems that will enable SSC project managers to track not only the financial aspects of the programme, but also the activities, achievements and outcomes of the participants. Some respondents noted that success indicators for individuals (increased salary, career progression etc.) may take some time to emerge. Intangible measures such as self-confidence and job satisfaction were felt to be equally important indicators of success for many participants.

There appears to be little SSC project-level evaluation activity to date. The concept of 'added value' will be central to project-level evaluations undertaken by individual SSCs, with the need to focus on the extent to which the project has (i) engaged employers that might otherwise not have provided training for their women employees (ii) supported training (or more, better or different training) for

women employees (iii) helped individual participants to progress in the labour market (particularly into male-dominated and/or skill shortage occupations).

## **5.6 Implications**

Following on from this brief overview of the key points emerging from the phase 1 qualitative evaluation research, SSDA, participating SSCs and wider stakeholders may wish to consider the following in relation to the next phase of project delivery:

- Projects should be encouraged to keep a log of the characteristics of employers that become engaged in the initiative, in particular employment size and whether they have previously been involved with SSCs and/or government funded skills initiatives to facilitate assessments of value added and additionality.
- SSDA and participating SSCs should continue to work with key stakeholders, including trade unions, EOC, other government agencies, SME and sector organisations to promote the initiative to 'hard to reach' employers, notably SMEs.
- Administrative procedures should be kept under review and SSCs encouraged to continue to share good practice, particularly in relation to minimising the burden on Intermediaries and employers.
- Sharing of good practice in relation to project delivery, and in particular in balancing flexibility with economy and efficiency in delivery, should be an important network function.
- While recognising the importance of numerical targets for participation in the initiative, due attention should be paid in monitoring and evaluation to issues of additionality and sustainability; in particular evidence of the impact of initiative on the behaviour and culture of employers and individuals should be collected where possible.
- Stakeholders such as trade unions, employer organisations, government departments and agencies have a key role to play in promoting the initiative to their constituent groups. In particular, the initiative would benefit from active promotion at the strategic level from trade unions (to encourage 'bottom-up' demand from workers) and employer organisations (to press the 'business case' for employer involvement).
- There is scope to improve the links between the Sector Pathways Initiative and the other elements of the Women and Work programme in areas where it is relevant, and stakeholders – notably government departments and agencies - have a role to play in ensuring widespread awareness of the broad scope of the programme.
- Finally, stakeholder influence is important in ensuring that the broad strategic context and objectives of the initiative are kept in mind at a time when the achievement of short-term numerical targets is uppermost in the minds of project managers and delivery agents. This may be done, for example, through continued active involvement with steering group and related processes.

## **5.7 Moving Forward**

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The second phase of the case studies will take place in February-March 2008. This will involve case studies of strands being implemented by all 9 of the SSCs participating in the initiative. The focus of this phase will be to explore the issues identified in this report further, to monitor changes since the last phase of the research and to identify what works and key lessons from the implementation of the programme. This will provide valuable evidence as the training and education infrastructure moves towards the policy aspiration of an employer-led approach to policy intervention.



## APPENDIX 1: TOPIC GUIDES

### Final Discussion guide Stakeholders

#### SECTION 1: Policy linkages and programme objectives

To what extent is the Sector Pathways Initiative consistent with the aims and objectives of the overall Women and Work Commission findings?

Probe: The intent of the Commission and the link to the WWSPI  
The development of the policy specification  
Are the aims and objectives of the Initiative:  
Specific  
Measurable  
Achievable  
Realistic  
Timebound  
Are each of the strands (recruitment, career progression, culture change) consistent?

What are the connections between the Women and Work Sector Pathways Initiative and other elements of the Women and Work programme (skills coaches and level 3 pilot) (consistency/movement) in theory and practice?

Probe: What are the connections? How are they working? How could they be improved?

How appropriate are the resources allocated to the initiative and the targets specified?

What will success look like to you?

#### SECTION 2: Delivery

Who are the key organisations involved in overseeing the delivery of the WWSPI?

Probe: How effective is partnership working?  
Are roles and responsibilities allocated, understood and being carried out?  
To what extent is there a shared understanding of the objectives of the WWSPI?  
To what extent are the objectives of the WWSPI consistent with wider organisational objectives? Are there any other relevant policies / strategies currently being implemented?  
What has worked well and not so well in terms of partnership working?

How well has the initiative been established?

Probe: The tendering / bidding process  
Timescales  
Role of the SSSA

How effective is the relationship with the SSCs?

Probe: Practical / administrative arrangements  
Level of understanding of each project  
Understanding of key project activities including: design; marketing; employer engagement; and participant engagement

What is working well and not so well in the delivery of the WWSPI?

Probe: What could be improved?

### **SECTION 3: Progress**

What is your understanding of progress to date of the initiative?

Establishing project infrastructure  
Commitment of appropriate resources (staff, funding, partners etc)  
Delivery begun  
Nature and quantity of outputs/outcomes

Probe: How effective has the process of project set-up and delivery been to date? Have there been any problems with this?

Probe: Is this where you would have expected the initiative to be at this stage. If not, why not?

Are you aware of any examples of good practice?

Sharing of good practice  
From/to SSCs  
from/to other stakeholders

### **SECTION 4: Outcomes**

How does WWSPI 'add value'?

Evidence of significant employer investment?

Is the initiative sustainable? What would it take to become sustainable?

Is there anything important that we haven't covered?

## Final Discussion guide SSCs

### SECTION 1: Project objectives

1.1 Aims and objective of the [named] WWSPI strand

Probe: Are the aims and objectives SMART?

Specific

- Recruitment/retention
- Career progression
- Culture change

Measurable

Achievable

Realistic

Timebound

1.2 How does the project fit with the wider SSC strategy in theory and in practice?

Probe: specifically in terms of the following:

Sector Skills Agreement (elaborate on identified skills shortages and skills gaps)

Employer engagement strategy (how does SSPI contribute to this?) Expanding employer base ('Hard to reach' employers)? Expanding services to employers (in what way)?

Equal Opportunities: (elaborate on position of women in the sectoral labour market)

1.3 How does the project fit with the policy intent of the Women and Work Commission?

1.4 What will success look like to you?

### SECTION 2: Delivery

2.1 What is the nature of the activity supporting the strand?

Probe: In terms of the nature of the following:

Design (key attributes/characteristics)

- e.g. Working with intermediaries

- Courses/coaching

- Qualifications/competency frameworks

- Incentives

- What is the selling proposition that will engage individuals/employers?

Marketing and promotion

- Plan developed? Can we have a copy?

- Approach adopted? (web-based, promotional materials, direct, Differentiates between employers and individuals?)

- Union learning reps? Other key actors?

Delivery Employer (approach, key characteristics)

- Engagement (Methods? Barriers?)

- Progression (systems to monitor support needs? Risk register?)

Delivery Individual (approach, key characteristics)  
Engagement (Methods? Barriers?)  
Progression (systems to monitor support needs? Risk register?)

Probe: what has worked well and not so well?  
Any work undertaken not covered in proposal?  
How could things be improved?

2.2 Who are the key partners involved in the development and delivery of the project

Probe: Key delivery partners? Who are they? What are their roles? What has worked well and not so well?

2.3 Connections of strand with other elements of the WWSPI project (consistency/movement) in theory and practice

In terms of:

Recruitment/retention/raising awareness  
Skills Needs Analysis /Training/Upskilling  
Career Progression  
Culture Change

Probe: What are the connections? How are they working? How could they be improved?

### SECTION 3: Progress

3.1 What has been the progress to date?

Dedicated project manager?  
Steering group established?  
Appropriate resources available?  
Other funding streams?  
Input from partners-collaborators?  
Number of starts on the scheme  
Nature, quantity of outputs and outcomes (employers and individuals) – how many expected and when?  
Employer investment (evidence?)  
What is working well/not so well?

3.2 How has the strand 'added value'?

Check against the following and collect examples and evidence if available

What specific groups (e.g. individual occupational/employed status or employer 'hard to reach') does the intervention 'target'? How does this add value?

New approaches to delivery (in SSC? In sector?) e.g. coaching? partnerships?

New improved progression routes/frameworks?

Use of LMI/SSA priority?

Increased opportunities for women /cultural change?

3.3 Is the strand sustainable?

Probe re barriers and strategy to overcome. 'Exit' strategy?

3.4 What is the nature of evaluation activity underpinning the strand?

Approach

Methods

Progress to date

Who are results reported to?

3.5 Examples of good practice

Sharing of good practice

From/to SSCs

from/to other stakeholders

3.6 Is there anything important that we haven't covered?

**APPENDIX 2: AGENDA FOR LEARNING WORKSHOP**

**Learning Workshop  
Old School Board, Leeds Metropolitan University**

**Thursday 26 July, 10.00 – 13.00**

**Agenda**

10.00 10.15	–	<b>Arrival, coffee, introductions</b>	
10.15 10.20	–	<b>Purpose of the day</b>	Carol Stanfield, SSDA
10.20 10.45	–	<b>Presentation and discussion of key points of progress report</b>	Steve Johnson and Helen Rodgers, PRI
10.45 11.30	–	<b>Key lessons learned to date by case study SSCs: general discussion</b>	Improve Lantra Skillfast-UK ConstructionSkills
11.30 11.45	–	<b>Tea, coffee Introduction to group discussions</b>	PRI
11.45 12.30	–	<b>Small group discussions around key questions</b>	ALL
12.30 13.00	–	<b>Feedback, overview, conclusions</b>	Steve Johnson, PRI
13.00 13.45	–	<b>Buffet lunch and informal discussion</b>	
13.45 16.00	–	<b>Operations Group meeting</b>	

## **KEY QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

### **Group 1: Project organisation, management and monitoring**

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of contracting out project management functions?
- How can we minimise the impact on employers and individuals of monitoring requirements?
- How can the WWSPI be effectively integrated with wider SSC structures, priorities and activities?
- How can we ensure we are effectively monitoring the program to enable reporting of success?
- What are the longer term implications for the programme/SSC? (e.g. facilitating culture change / position of women in labour market, sustainability)

### **Group 2: Delivery mechanisms**

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of (a) a single provider (b) a wide range of providers?
- What is the appropriate balance between a structured programme and bespoke provision tailored to employer and/or individual need?
- Balancing long-term sustainability with short-term delivery – is there a conflict?
- How important to employers and individuals is the achievement of qualifications?
- What are the longer term implications for the programme/SSC? (e.g. facilitating culture change / position of women in labour market, sustainability)

### **Group 3: Engaging employers**

- What are the most effective ways of marketing the WWSPI to employers?
- How can providers, intermediaries and other stakeholders best be engaged in the marketing process?
- To what extent is there a temptation to focus on the 'usual suspects' rather than 'hard to reach' employers? What are the implications of this?
- What are the longer term implications for the programme/SSC? (e.g. facilitating culture change / position of women in labour market, sustainability)

### **Group 4: Engaging individuals**

- How can employers be supported to ensure that sufficient numbers of women employees are engaged in WWSPI?
- To what extent and in what ways might the marketing effort be geared towards individuals as well as employers?
- How can the role of trade unions in the marketing and delivery of WWSPI be enhanced?
- What are the longer term implications for the programme/SSC? (e.g. facilitating culture change / position of women in labour market, sustainability)



## **List of previous SSDA Publications**

*Please note all publications can be downloaded from our website [www.ssda.org.uk](http://www.ssda.org.uk)*

Research Report 1

Skills for Business 1000

Research Report 2

Evaluation of the Trailblazer Phase of the Sector Skills Council Network

Research Report 3

Skills for Business Network – Phase I Evaluation

Research Report 4

Skills for Business 2003 – Survey of Employers

Research Report 5

Skills Pay: The Contribution of Skills to Business Success

Research Report 6

The UK Skills and Productivity Agenda: The Evidence Base for the SSDA's Strategic Plan 2005-2008

Research Report 7

The UK Workforce: Realising our Potential

Research Report 8

Sectoral Management Priorities: Management Skills and Capacities

Research Report 9

Raising Sector Skills Levels – How Responsive is Local Training Supply?

Research Report 10

Skills for Business Network: Phase 2 Evaluation Main Report

Research Report 11

Skills for Business 2004: Survey of Employers

Research Report 12

Skills for Business Network: Phase 2 Evaluation Case Studies

Research Report 13

Sectoral Productivity Differences Across the UK

Research Report 14

Sectors Matter: An International Study of Sector Skills and Productivity

Research Report 15

Evaluation of Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreement Process

Research Report 16

Skills Abroad: A Comparative Assessment of International Policy Approaches to Skills Leading to the Development of Policy Recommendations for the UK

Research Report 17

The Comparative Capability of UK Managers

Research Report 18  
Skills for Business Network 2005: Survey of Employers

Research Report 19  
Skills for Business Network: Phase 3 Evaluation Main Report

Research Report 20  
Training and Establishment Survival

Research Report 21  
The Distribution and Returns to Qualifications in the Sector Skills Councils

Research Report 22  
Training, Job Satisfaction and Establishment Performance

Research Report 23  
Cross-Country Analysis of Productivity and Skills at Sector Level

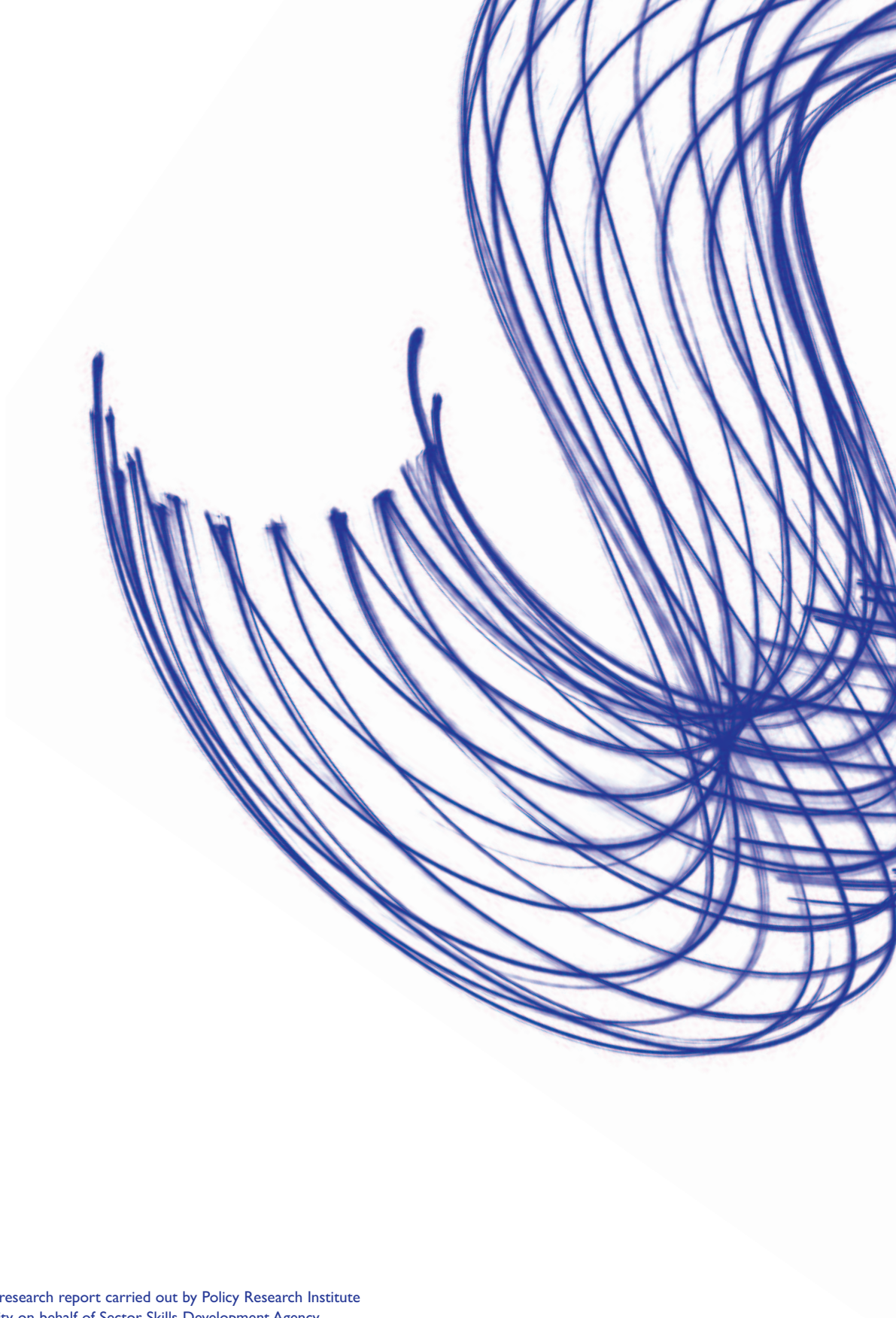
Research Report 24  
Sector Skills Agreements Implementation Progress Report

Research Report 25  
Job Matching in the UK and Europe

Research Report 26  
Skills Upgrading Needs: The Challenge for Employers and Training Providers in Scotland and Northern Ireland

Working Futures 2: National Report 2004-2014

The Sector Skills Almanac for the UK, 2007



This report is a summary of a research report carried out by Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University on behalf of Sector Skills Development Agency.

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