



Leading learning and skills

‘Successful Participation for All’: Widening Adult Participation Stocktake at 18 Months

Executive Summary

1 This research examined the impact of *'Successful Participation for All'* highlighting successes and barriers and looking at how the strategy sits in the current operating context some 18 months-2 years after publication. The evidence comes from conversations with Learning and Skills Council (LSC) staff and providers, supplemented with desk research.

'Successful Participation for All'

2 The rationale behind the LSC's strategy was that extending learning to disadvantaged and under-represented groups could contribute to Level 2 targets, Skills for Life, the national skills agenda, social inclusion and cohesion, and promoting appreciation of learning. The strategy set out LSC's 2010 vision for equitable access to, and benefit from, learning, and interim milestones for specific areas of development.

Section One: The Nature and Impact of Local, Regional and National Activity

3 The broad thrust of the strategy has been acted on and all the milestones are being addressed. The research found a deep commitment to widening adult participation (WAP) among LSC staff and providers, and a consensus that WAP has been integrated into the mainstream of LSC operations through business planning, three-year development plans and StARs, for example. These are also the main channels for communicating LSC's intentions for WAP and for monitoring success. Activity on WAP is not, however, directly referenced back to the strategy, and may not be explicitly labelled as such. Providers see themselves as a reciprocal influence on LLSCs, and external partners such as Jobcentre Plus can also reinforce WAP aims.

4 All strands of LSC-funded learning can be vehicles for widening participation, making it a cross-cutting issue for all staff – though generally one individual or team takes the lead, often combining this with responsibilities such as the VCS or IAG. Estimates of mainstream LLSC budgets devoted to WAP varied widely (from 5 per cent to 50 per cent). Stability and flexibility are considered at least as important as the amount of funding available.

5 Some LLSCs are taking a more directive approach to targeting priority groups to reinforce the focus on disadvantaged people rather than increasing participation and reaching targets by enlisting the easier to reach. Pinpointing prospective learners, especially in low numbers, is still seen as a challenge, as is tracking learners from one learning experience to another and demonstrating meaningful progression, especially given the more casual engagement and

tangential paths that can characterise adults' involvement in learning. The Participation Index now available to LLSCs, and the forthcoming Unique Learner Identifier, should help.

- 6 Views on proven successful approaches to WAP coalesced around:
 - Partnership and collaboration, making best use of different expertise
 - Embedding WAP, sharing responsibility across all areas of business and all providers; and
 - Better data, and more intelligent use of it.
- 7 Despite their limitations, short-term, 'offline' initiatives (such as WAPAF; VCS Capacity-Building Fund) could be valuable in energising people and practice.
- 8 Among numerous examples cited, emerging common themes included use of community venues and partnerships for delivery, including support for providers, especially from the VCS. IAG is seen as an integral part of all learning, however brief. Besides 'dedicated' budgets supporting WAP, the Employer Training Programme and Offender Learning and Skills initiative were cited as potentially fruitful areas for WAP.
- 9 Revision of the quality improvement strategy, RARPA and the Framework for Achievement (FfA) are significant, centrally-driven developments.

Section Two: Barriers to Widening Adult Participation

- 10 Common themes emerging from discussion of barriers to widening adult participation were:
 - Funding – low levels, and lack of flexibility and consistency;
 - Progression – the difficulties of tracking learners and proving the value of WAP activity
 - Different interpretations of 'demand' – whether what is on offer is what people want
 - Communication – the importance (and often lack of) consistency, clarity and transparency in building good working relationships and reliable provision; and
 - Misperceptions about the 'safeguard'.

11 The influence of other strategies and priorities also arose in this context and is dealt with in Section 3.

Section Three: How Widening Adult Participation sits with more recent Strategies and Priorities

12 The Skills Strategies I and II (*'21st Century Skills: realising our potential'* and *'Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work'*) are clearly central in determining LSC's spending priorities. The documents themselves promise a great deal that is favourable to WAP, recognising that some sections of society have yet to realise the benefits of learning, and introducing potentially helpful measures such as free tuition to Level 2, re-emphasis on basic skills, the Framework for Achievement and Testbed Learning Communities. However the research uncovered misgivings about possible pitfalls in implementation, reinforced by reductions in budgets for adult learning and narrowing of performance targets.

13 *'Agenda for Change'* is likely to be equally significant. Though it does not explicitly address WAP, it too contains elements that might help, such as undertakings to introduce some stability in funding and consideration of social, individual and community impact among quality measures. It will be important to ensure this potential is realised as further proposals are developed and put into practice.

14 *'Working Together'* and *'National equality and diversity strategy 2004-2007'* complement the WAP strategy.

15 The Active Communities Unit's ChangeUp initiative potentially supports widening participation through its investment in VCS infrastructure, and LSC has tried to ensure complementarity with *'Working Together'* implementation. Local Authority Community Strategies and Neighbourhood Renewal activity can also influence LSC priorities for disadvantaged groups.

Section Four: Taking forward the aspirations in 'Successful Participation for All'

16 Since the original *'Successful participation for all'* vision remains valid it needs to be brought to bear at an early stage on new policy as well as implementation of existing strategies. The current re-shaping of LSC organisation and staffing is another arena in which WAP interests must be satisfactorily covered.

17 Specific areas for attention could include:

- Continuing efforts to embed widening participation as a cross-cutting responsibility – reference in Annual Statement of Priorities; WAP champions with capacity, expertise and authority
- Applying evidence to support the case for widening adult participation – moving beyond descriptive “good practice”;
- Emphasising and clarifying links with strategies on Equality and Diversity and the Voluntary and Community Sector
- Reinforcing the need for intelligent targeting to widen (rather than simply increase) participation;
- Investing in effective approaches to tracking learners by LSC and providers
- Ensuring successful implementation of RARPA and putting WAP learners at the centre of forthcoming Framework for Achievement pilots
- Recognising the importance of the full spectrum of IAG, both formal and informal - monitoring current arrangements to ensure ‘harder to help’ clients are being catered for, and influencing the review of IAG; and
- Making the most of wider alliances and opportunities - the Leitch review of skills; increased recognition of the benefits of learning by other Departments and agencies; Testbed Learning Communities; Local Strategic Partnerships; Local Area Agreements; Regional Skills Partnerships.

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