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The Challenge of Establishing Sustainable Workplace 'Skills for Life' Provision in the UK: Organisational 'Strategies' and Individual 'Tactics'

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Abstract:

Drawing on longitudinal data from the ESRC-funded 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace learning' project (2003-2008), together with recent findings from research undertaken under the auspices of the LLAKES research centre (Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies), this paper seeks to explore the key factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainable 'Skills for Life' (literacy, numeracy and ESOL) workplace provision in the UK.

We draw on the metaphor of a social ecology of learning to explore the inter-relationships between individuals and groups at policy and organisational level and combine this with Michael de Certeau's theoretical work on quotidian social practices in order to cast light on the diverse ways in which 'Skills for Life' provision has been put to use by learners. The paper argues that the 'Skills for Life' national strategy has generated a complex 'ecology of learning' at policy level, whereby a byzantine and shifting funding landscape, with its concomitant bureaucracy and strong emphasis on target-bearing qualifications has militated against long-term sustainable provision. Those organisations that have managed to sustain provision have generally succeeded in integrating 'Skills for Life' courses within a broader 'ecology of learning' whereby there is both support and formal recognition for such provision within the organisation as a whole.

Keywords*:* Skills for Life; workplace learning; funding; sustainability; United Kingdom

Introduction

In 1999, a government inquiry headed by Lord Claus Moser highlighted a national 'skills crisis' facing the UK in the form of major literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies amongst adults (DFEE 1999). Drawing on evidence from OECD surveys undertaken in the mid-1990s, the inquiry reported that 7 million adults (one in five of the UK population) had poor literacy and numeracy skills (at or below the age of an 11-year-old child) and 40% had problems with numeracy.[1] The report acted as a significant catalyst for the launch of the national 'Skills for Life' strategy in England in 2001 which channelled more than £5 billion towards ring-fenced funding for free literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision; the development of core curricula, learning materials and national qualifications based on new standards; new qualifications for initial teacher training and professional development for teachers; and the setting of challenging national targets for the achievement of qualifications.[2] An important component of this strategy entailed major investment in the funding of literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the workplace in the form of discrete literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses in the workplace, literacy embedded in IT courses, literacy embedded in vocational and job-specific training as well as 'Skills for Life' courses undertaken in online learning centres (funded via learndirect) in the workplace.

The publication of the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006 (an independent review by Lord Sandy Leitch commissioned by the British government in 2004) and the subsequent launch of the 'Train to Gain' initiative (which was both a brokerage scheme to provide advice to businesses across England as well as an elaborate training scheme to fund full Level 2 and 'Skills for Life' provision for adults within the workplace) further extended UK policy emphasis on the significance of 'Skills for Life' workplace provision. Despite a dearth of

[1] See OECD (1997) for a description of the IALS data on which the Moser Committee based its recommendations. More recently, the 'Skills for Life' Needs Survey of 2002/03 produced a lower indication of those adults who struggle with literacy, with an estimate of 5.8 million people below Level 1 (Williams, 2003).

[2] Comparable literacy initiatives were also launched in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although this paper focuses primarily on England, our project sample included two sites in Scotland and therefore reference is also made to the literacy strategy undertaken in this country.

evidence relating to the impact of basic skills courses on productivity (Ananiadou et al, 2003), the government's rationale for investing in 'Skills for Life' provision throughout this period has been largely economic in nature: the development of literacy and numeracy skills amongst lower-level employees is deemed to be a vital means of enhancing the UK's global economic competitiveness (Wolf and Evans, 2011, p.15).

Drawing on longitudinal data from the ESRC-funded 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace learning' project (2003-2008), together with recent findings from research undertaken under the auspices of the LLAKES research centre (Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies), this paper seeks to explore the key factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainable 'Skills for Life' workplace provision in the UK. The 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' project was based on structured interviews and literacy assessments with 564 learners in 53 organisations from a variety of sectors (including transport, local government, food manufacturing, engineering and health) as well as structured interviews with the relevant managers and tutors at the selected sites.[3] In addition, two phases of in-depth interviews were undertaken with a sub-sample of 66 learners from 10 sites as well as with their relevant managers and tutors. Further research into 'Skills for Life' workplace provision has built on the original investigation (2003-2008) by undertaking a new phase of research fieldwork and analysis between 2009 and 2011. This has included additional case studies in organisations that established provision under 'Train to Gain' and a longer-term follow-up of managers and workers in the original companies, in order to elucidate factors that are important for sustainability over longer periods of time, in changing economic and political contexts (see summary of research projects in appendix). This current research has been undertaken within Strand 3 of the LLAKES research programme. [4] Strand 3 is concerned with the social, economic and cultural factors that influence and impede individuals' attempts to control their lives, and their ability to respond to and manage opportunities.

[3] Almost two-thirds of the learners were male with an average age of just over 40. Almost all of these individuals were in permanent full-time employment at the time of the interview. The average length of employment with the current employer was almost 8 years.

[4] The follow-up research component of the LLAKES project began in the summer of 2009 and was completed by May 2010. The data gathered for this paper therefore relates to 'Skills for Life' policies up to the election of the Coalition government in May 2010.

We espouse the utility of employing a 'social ecology' metaphor to explore 'Skills for Life' provision at the policy, organizational and individual level. At the level of the individual, we draw on the work of Michael de Certeau in order to cast light on the diverse ways in which individuals have selectively appropriated and reworked the affordances of 'Skills for Life' workplace courses to pursue a wide range of personal motivations. De Certeau's interpretation of everyday social practices in terms of the ingenuity of individuals in perpetually refashioning social representations (a process that is encapsulated in his oft-cited phrase of 'poaching on the territory of others') can be usefully applied as an antidote to the dangers of viewing educational interventions in overly deterministic terms that do not allow for an exploration of individual instances of the selective appropriation and reinterpretation of these initiatives. Our aim in writing this paper is therefore twofold: to take advantage of the longer-term vantage point afforded by recent LLAKES research in order to explore the key challenges to 'Skills for Life' provision and to make a case for the utility of applying de Certeau's work in order to enhance understanding of individual engagement with educational interventions within the workplace.

Sustainable 'Skills for Life' workplace provision: theoretical perspectives

In examining workplace provision, including the factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainability, it is important to take account of three scales of activity (Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird and Unwin, 2006). At the 'macro' level, wider social structures and social institutions can be fundamental in enabling or preventing effective learning from taking place. This includes the legal frameworks that govern employees' entitlements, industrial relations and the role of trades unions as well as the social structuring of business systems Whitley (2000: 88)

At the intermediate scale of activity, the nature of the learning environment in the organisation can expand or restrict learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). Establishing cultures that support expansive learning environments is problematic. For most employers, workers' learning is not a priority and a lower-order decision. As Evans et al (2006) have noted, first-order decisions concern markets and competitive strategy. These in turn affect second-order strategies concerning work organisation and job design. In this context, workplace learning is likely to be a third-order strategy (see also Keep and Mayhew, 1999). The social ecology

metaphor provides a useful avenue for exploring the complexity and inter-dependence of factors that impact on learning at all three levels (Evans et al, 2010).

The application of social ecological approaches range from macro-level policy analysis (Weaver-Hightower 2008), to the adoption of the 'learning individual' as the unit of analysis, in social psychological research (Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) or, more recently, in the context of life-course research (e.g. Biesta et al 2007) In considering these scales of activity, it is important to avoid assumptions about the straightforward dissemination of educational policy but instead explore the contestation, selective appropriation and interpretation of educational initiatives at the policy, organisational and individual level. As Ball (1998 cited in Weaver-Hightower 2008, p. 153) states, 'most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice.'

De Certeau's (1984) conceptual distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics' is useful in allowing for an exploration of the intended and unintended consequences of 'Skills for Life' educational initiatives at the organisational and individual level. In his analysis of the uses to which social representation and modes of social behaviour are put by individuals and groups, de Certeau links 'strategies' with institutions and structures of power, while 'tactics' are employed by individuals to create space for themselves in environments defined by 'strategies'. Strategies are only available to subjects of 'will and power,' because of their access to a spatial or institutional location that allows them to objectify the rest of the social environment: 'A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as a proper (*propre*) and thus serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clienteles,' 'targets,' or 'objects of research'' (De Certeau 1984, 35). Although individuals lack a space of their own from which to apply strategies, they remain active agents through ongoing tactical practices which continuously re-signify and disrupt the schematic ordering of reality produced through the strategic practices of the powerful.

Through his analysis of a variety of everyday practices, such as talking, reading, moving about, shopping and cooking, de Certeau (ibid) illustrates his claim that everyday life works by a process of 'poaching on the territory of others,' recombining the rules and products that already exist in culture through a process of 'bricolage' that is influenced, but never wholly determined, by those rules and products. The act of reading a book, for example, is described as a silent or hidden process of production (a 'poiēsis') 'which makes the text habitable, like

a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient' (ibid, XX1). In keeping with post-modernist literary criticism, de Certeau suggests that 'every reading modifies its object…one literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read' (ibid, 169). De Certeau's theoretical work underlines the importance of taking account of the subterranean significance of individual engagement with social ecological patterns of behaviour:

> The Greeks called these 'ways of operating' *mētis*. But they go much further back, to the immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence in these tactics' (ibid, X1X).

As will be seen in more detail in the next section, the use of literacy and numeracy provision in organisational 'strategies' is not always congruent with the broader 'Skills for Life' national strategy which privileges the economic goal of developing literacy and numeracy skills in order to raise productivity. At the level of the individual, learners have engaged with 'Skills for Life' provision in order to pursue a wide array of goals that relate to their diverse and shifting life-styles. In de Certeau's terms, they have 'tactically' employed the opportunities that are afforded by 'Skills for Life' provision by using them with respect to ends and references that are not confined to the highly economic agenda that underpins these interventions.

Organisational 'strategies' and individual 'tactics'

Despite the highly economic rationale underpinning 'Skills for Life' workplace provision, the majority of personnel managers interviewed as part of the ABSWL project cited the importance of boosting the general development of employees as the primary motivation for delivering 'Skills for Life' courses rather than the need to address deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills. Underpinning this goal lay a variety of motivations relating to the need to boost staff morale, foster a positive company ethos and enhance corporate solidarity as well as address unequal access to training opportunities amongst lower-level employees. In many cases, the courses were regarded as a useful means of compensating employees for the frequently routine and menial nature of their work. A manager of a bus company in the East Midlands, for example, outlined the demanding and tedious nature of the drivers' work and stated: 'We can't change the conditions so we are trying to find other ways to make them feel better about themselves, their job and ultimately the company.' Many employees spoke

English as a second language (ESOL learners represented a sizeable 35% of the full sample whereas the current UK workforce is made up of only 3% of employees who do not speak English as their first language) and there was interest in improved communication, though it was rarely seen as central to job performance.[5]

While companies and public sector organisations have utilized 'Skills for Life' provision to pursue a variety of 'strategic' objectives- relating largely to the need to develop the psychological contract between employer and employee - learners have 'tactically' insinuated an even more diverse array of goals and understandings into the experience of undertaking a literacy, numeracy and ESOL course in the workplace. Quantitative data from Time 1 and Time 2 of the ABSWL project revealed that employees were motivated to engage in workplace 'Skills for Life' provision by a far wider range of factors than merely the wish to improve performance at work (see Table 1). During the course of in-depth interviews, learners divulged in more detail a whole range of factors for engagement in such courses: from 'curiosity' to wanting to make up for missed earlier educational opportunities; from wanting specific help with job-relevant skills to wider career aims; from a desire to help children with school work to wanting self-improvement and personal development (Evans et al, 2008).

[Table 1 near here]

In-depth interviews also cast light on the wide range of individual and social strategies for coping with existing literacy and numeracy skills (e.g. reliance on colleagues and supervisors for support with form-filling) as well as the significance of 'informal learning' in developing these skills in a variety of workplace contexts. [6] In this respect it is important to take account of the wide variation of literacy practices in differing organisational contexts; whereas some employees (e.g. care-workers in residential care homes) remarked upon an increase in report-writing in response to auditing demands and more onerous health and safety regulations, the majority of employees were engaged in occupations that entailed the persistence of routine work in which there was negligible use of literacy and numeracy practices. Such findings are compatible with a growing corpus of research that has underlined the persistence of relatively

[5] Employers underwrote participation in paid working time. All sites incurred organisational costs, not least in negotiations with line managers over shifts; many provided equipment and furnished teaching space.

[6] See Evans and Waite (2008, 2010) for an analysis of the interweaving of 'formal' and 'informal' learning opportunities related to workplace 'Skills for Life' provision.

routine or manual employment in large swathes of the UK economy (see Felstead et al, 2007; Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Lloyd et al, 2008).

For many learners, participation in workplace 'Skills for Life' courses yielded a range of positive outcomes in terms of increased confidence, greater willingness to engage in further learning, enhanced awareness and appreciation of the English language, increased capacity to help children with their homework and increased motivation to pursue a range of hobbies and educational interests (Table 2). The workplace as a site of learning has provided an effective channel for many learners to address wider personal and educational goals and overcome the legacy of previously negative educational experiences (e.g. Evans and Waite, 2009).

[Table 2 near here]

In de Certeau's (1984) terms, learners have effectively 'made of' the knowledge and skills afforded by workplace 'Skills for Life' provision- in a 'hidden' or 'secondary' process of production- by using them with respect to references and ends that relate to their diverse and frequently shifting life-styles. Organisations' promotion of 'Skills for Life' courses for largely generic rather than job-specific considerations has provided a broad domain for the pursuit of individual 'tactics' which variously intersect and diverge from company strategic objectives according to the complex inter-relationship between learner-specific considerations and organisational imperatives.

The case of Coopers- a food manufacturing company in the north-east of England- provides a useful illustration of the interplay between organisational 'strategies' and individual 'tactics'. In a previous publication (Waite et al 2011, appendix), we have highlighted 3 individuals at Coopers with widely differing levels of commitment to organisational priorities who have nonetheless all creatively sought to appropriate learning opportunities to pursue personal motivations. Bill Williams, a 'front-line operative', maintains a staunchly independent stance to many company initiatives and has made use of the opportunities of online learning in order to pursue his interests outside work and facilitate his capacity to help his child with his homework. Tracy Beaumont has utilised the opportunities afforded by 'Skills for Life' provision in order to address the deep-seated legacy of negative educational experiences. Michelle Lewis has worked her way up from the shop floor to a managerial job. Although her career objectives and perspectives are closely aligned with those of the company, her experience of learning also entails a process of appropriation and adaptation- a 'making of'

the learning opportunities- in so far as the course has allowed her to address specific personal concerns relating to her lack of confidence related to her low level of school qualifications.

To interpret such tactical practices in terms of a radical break or discontinuity with the goals of Skills for Life provision would be an inadequate depiction of a much more subtle process whereby learners are engaging with company priorities and utilising the affordances of workplace learning but are adeptly interweaving their own personal motivations into company 'strategies'. They are engaging in the type of creative process that de Certeau has termed 'poiēsis'; acts of production that are not always registered or officially designated as such because they remain scattered over the realm of 'strategy'.

By drawing on the concept of 'poiēsis', de Certeau highlights the acts of production that take place in everyday social life but which are not always formally recognized, remaining 'invisible' or 'secondary'. In challenging the associations of action and passivity that are implicit in the producer/consumer binary, de Certeau's work facilitates, in the context of workplace learning, a scrutinising of a range of binaries – e.g. teachers/learners, employers/employees, knowledge workers/routine workers- that can potentially depict the latter half of these distinctions as the passive recipients of those who generate and disseminate new forms of knowledge or instil new working practices.

Analysis of organisations that have developed long term 'Skills for Life' provision

Out of the 53 sites recruited for the 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' Project, 11 of these were running 'Skills for Life' provision at the time of LLAKES follow up interviews in 2009-2010: 4 public sector organisations (2 local authorities, 1 hospital, 1 public sector transport company), 6 private sector companies and 1 charity.

Only 7 sites may be described as having reasonably durable provision during the project time-scale in so far as provision was running at the time of ABSWL Time 1, Time 2 and follow up LLAKES research interviews. Four sites can be described as having 'intermittent' provision in so far as courses were not running at the time of Time 2 interviews but had been revived at the time of LLAKES follow up interviews in 2009-2010. The organisations that succeeded in developing long-term provision throughout the duration of this time-scale were: ***Southern Transport Systems (STS)*** *(*a large transport provider with approximately 17,000 employees), ***Thorpton Local Authority in London*** (where Union Learning Representatives

(ULRs) have played an important role in implementing a series of 'Skills for Life' courses in partnership with management), ***Lindall PLC (***a food manufacturing company in Cornwall with 700 employees), ***Brandon Care Home*** *(a* purpose-built village community for people with learning disabilities, employing 354 staff), ***Melford Hospital, Finross City Council in Scotland*** and ***Baden PLC*** ***(***an 'asset management' company with 54, 000 employees).

These organisations have generally managed to garner broader support for 'Skills for Life' provision throughout the organisation as whole. 'Skills for Life' development agencies promote the importance of establishing 'whole organisation' approaches to the development of 'Skills for Life' provision in the workplace and other sectors 'where consideration of literacy, language and numeracy (Skills for Life) provision is central to the whole organisation at all levels, ranging from strategic leadership and management to the delivery of all services, including those involving training and development' (QIA 2008: 10). Six out the seven highlighted sites managed to implement provision that approximated (without complying fully with) these 'whole organisation' approaches in so far as they benefited from the support of senior management, who were frequently enlisted in order to advocate the benefits of literacy training to the line managers of learners. Lindall PLC represents an exceptional case in so far as provision within this company depended on the work of one personnel manager. Provision within this company would therefore appear to be most vulnerable since it is entirely dependent on the hard work and determination of an individual 'key player'. In all these sites, 'Skills for Life' provision has been effectively integrated into an organisational 'ecology of learning' insofar as provision has effectively responded to a clearly identified need in the workplace (e.g. increased report writing in response to auditing and health and safety regulations) as well as catering for the diverse interests and motivations of learners outside the workplace

In embracing wide ranging motivations for learning (rather than focusing exclusively on addressing literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies), these organisations have provided a broad institutional space for learners to tactically 'make of' their learning in order to pursue an array of personal goals. It is noteworthy that all these organisations are large employers with sufficient resources to uphold the wide-ranging benefits of learning and establish a robust learning infrastructure. This is consistent with research undertaken on US literacy

provision in the workplace which found that larger firms (those with more than 500 employees) were more likely to establish longer-term courses (Nelson 2004).[7]

Key challenges to the establishment of sustainable 'Skills for Life' provision: the impact of funding arrangements

Following the onset of the 'Skills for Life' national strategy in 2001, the majority of funding for workplace 'Skills for Life' provision was allocated directly through the Learning and Skills Council which paid the providers of courses largely on a fee-per-student basis. [8] From 2006 onwards, the majority of government funding for 'Skills for Life' workplace provision has been channelled through Train to Gain which is both 'a brokerage scheme which provides impartial, independent advice on training to businesses across England' as well as an elaborate training scheme which was nationally rolled out in 2006 to fund full Level 2 and 'Skills for Life' provision for adults within the workplace. As part of 'additional flexibilities' added to Train to Gain, the LSC announced in July 2008 that full literacy and numeracy qualifications at Entry Level 1-3, Level 1 and Level 2 would be fully funded irrespective of prior attainment (Linford 2008/2009, 98).

The major change in funding arrangements as a result of the transition from direct LSC to Train to Gain funding, together with the complex and rapidly shifting nature of Train to Gain, has served to militate against longer-term provision. Providers and have been compelled to employ a reactive, pragmatic and flexible approach to funding that is not always compatible with longer-term strategic planning and the development of sustained partnerships with organisations. Providers also struggle with the voluminous bureaucracy associated with workplace 'Skills for Life' provision. During the course of providing evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills in 2007, the chief executives of the two largest training providers revealed that adoption of a new learner entailed the filling in 14 forms which took about two hours to complete. Hence 'we lose a number of people because

[7] This research also found that courses that continued over the long-term (after initial funding had ceased) shared the common features of: ' an internal champion who had decision-making power or knew how to influence those who did, a well-identified internal issue or problem, and evidence that the program had helped to address that issue.'

[8] In Scotland, local authorities receive block grants under the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and have a major degree of control over their own priorities

they just cannot be bothered to go through the process, even though we hold the pen for them… To put it into perspective, I have got something like 50 people who are employed full time on processing bits of paper, which is inordinate waste' (Education and Skills Select Committee 2007, Q273, Q274, supplementary memorandum from Dan Wright).

The heavy emphasis in funding and accountability regimes on output related considerations **(**e.g. the achievement of qualifications) has also had major implications for sustainability. Although in the early days of 'Skills for Life' (at the beginning of the 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' project) it was still relatively easy to obtain funding for courses that did not lead to a qualification, subsequent changes to funding entailed a shift towards the achievement of qualifications and this trait was further enshrined under Train to Gain. Under Train to Gain funding criteria, 25% of funding was withheld until qualifications (at Entry Level, Level 1 or Level 2) were achieved. Colleges were expected to fulfil quotas of achieved qualifications on the basis of contractual arrangements with the Learning and Skills Council which was in turn responsible for fulfilling Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets that ultimately aimed to ensure that '95% of the working age population achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy by 2020'. [9]

Train to Gain funding guidelines stipulate that learners should pass a qualification that is one level above their pre-existing standard (as reflected in the initial assessment). Yet to achieve such progress requires a large number of hours of tuition. For example, Comings estimates that effective literacy improvement amongst adults in the US- moving up the equivalent of a grade or school year- typically requires 150 hours of tuition (Comings, 2004). In addition to creating pressures on providers (which can sometimes entail the employment of various subversive techniques to fulfil targets for qualifications) the stress on target-bearing qualifications in 'Skills for Life' workplace provision also exacerbates the potential for diverging interests between providers and organisations. In Brightlands Bakery, a cakes and

[9] To work towards the Leitch targets the LSC agreed the following PSA delivery plan with DIUS. From August 2008 until July 2011 (3 years): 597,000 people of working age to achieve a first level 1 or above approved literacy qualification. 390,000 to achieve a first entry level 3 or above approved numeracy qualification (LSC fact sheet 12).

pudding manufacturer in the North-West of England, the Union Learning Representative (ULR) had been effective in establishing online courses (based at the company learning centre through learndirect) as well as group ESOL sessions for company employees in partnership with the local college. However, company- provider relations became increasingly strained and ultimately broke down altogether in 2007 (leading to the termination of the company's contract with the college) over the issue of the provider's emphasis on achieving qualifications. According to the ULR at the learning centre:

> The main problem was with the college. They wanted to meet their own targets and draw down government funding for 'Skills for Life' courses. But that was not necessarily what the employees wanted. They were not listening to the individual. In the end they didn't want to enrol more students because they were more bothered about the completion of the course.

The lack of profitability for providers in running workplace 'Skills for Life' courses has also served as a major impediment to durable provision. None of the organisations that had ceased offering basic skills between Time 1 and Time 2 of the ABSWL project had actively rejected the idea. Most had stopped because tuition-free courses were no longer being offered to them by providers. The vast majority of sites ran courses with a small number of learners: typically well under ten employees signed up even for the first session, and there was often a high drop-out rate thereafter. The only exceptions were the three workplaces where attendance was effectively compulsory. In a context where providers' teaching and administrative costs were fixed, but payment was per learner, these type of small classes were generally not sustainable (Wolf et al 2010).

In addition, funding arrangements both before and after the introduction of Train to Gain have not accorded sufficient recognition to the costs involved in establishing 'Skills for Life' workplace courses (Wolf et al 2010). Although Skills for life provision benefited from preferential funding under Train to Gain (in the form of a 1.4 weighting 'uplift), recent interviews revealed that many colleges were running 'Skills for Life' workplace provision at a loss in order to meet targets imposed by the Learning and Skills Council. A 'Skills for Life' workplace consultant revealed in January 2010 that 'Workplace 'Skills for Life' is still not profitable. The colleges are subsidising it. They have been given targets by LSCs and are prepared to make a loss in order to meet targets.' In this context, training providers, who are

not able to subsidise workplace 'Skills for Life' provision, are more prone to deploy methods to enhance cost effectiveness such as reliance on learners' self-study through distance learning materials.

Several providers revealed that there had been a 'freeze' on funding new workplace 'Skills for Life' courses through Train to Gain within the 2009-2010 financial year. This occurred as a result of problems relating to the allocation of financial resources within Train to Gain. Over-ambitious targets led to an under-spend of £150m (out of a budget of £747m) in the first two years; the following year, a failure to anticipate increased demand because of changes in eligibility to increase learner numbers as well as the impact of the recession led to an overspend of £50m.[10] One tutor and manager from a further education college in London, who had been successful in promoting 'Skills for Life' provision over several years amongst key target groups (e.g. care workers and teaching assistants) expressed his frustration with the system in the following terms in October 2009: 'The demand is now stimulated but the supply has been cut off.'

Train to Gain's brokerage scheme (whereby 'Skills Advisers' provide companies with advice and referral to providers) was also criticized during the course of recent follow-up interviews with tutors and managers at colleges and training providers on the basis of being cumbersome and largely ineffectual. Providers have generally sought to promote 'Skills for Life' workplace provision through direct contact with organisations rather than through reliance on Train to Gain's brokerage scheme.

In addition to this main channel of government funding through the LSC and Train to Gain, a considerable amount of provision has been funded, from the outset of the 'Skills for Life' national strategy, in ways which were intrinsically short-term or focused on specific initiatives. The 'Pathfinder Projects' which were meant to develop good practice for the future provided levels of funding which could not be sustained on a one-off basis. 'Employer Training Pilots' which were designed to pave the way for larger-scale funding of workplace

[10] A report published by the Commons Public Accounts Committee heavily criticized Train to Gain, claiming the scheme had been 'mismanaged' since its launch in 2006 BBC News at Ten Thursday, 21 January 2010

provision and which acted as a forerunner of Train to Gain between 2002 and 2005 did not lead seamlessly to further funded provision but instead left many organisations with an abrupt termination of funding. The Union Learning Fund (established in 1998) has facilitated the establishment of learning centres, the promotion of NVQs, the training of learning representatives and the development of new materials (Finlay et al, 2007, 233). We encountered many positive examples of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) who had drawn on their credibility as members of the union in order to establish courses and facilitate existing provision. Equally the Union Learning Fund (ULF) has facilitated positive partnerships between management and unions, who have bracketed industrial relations in the specific context of forging a common learning agenda. However, the allocation of funding through the auspices of the ULF has tended to focus on specific projects and has not facilitated longer-term sustainability. In an engineering company in the West Midlands, for example, Union Learning Representatives who developed 'Skills for Life' and computer courses became exasperated with the ULF as a result of lack of flexibility as well as support for long-term development of provision and eventually resorted to developing a partnership directly with the local college: 'it took two years to get the funding there but then, we've got to use it or get it set up in a certain time scale which we couldn't do here. So then we lost it. And then we started back up again and there is no fund there.'[11] Similarly, the European Social Fund has been allocated on a project-specific basis in a way that has not allowed organisations to develop longer-term capacity to deliver 'Skills for Life' provision.[12]

Key challenges to the establishment of sustainable 'Skills for Life' provision (2): the adaptation of 'Skills for Life' provision to the workplace

The majority of sites involved in the ABSWL project did not provide a stable learning environment in which to develop long-lasting 'Skills for Life' courses. In the space of just over two years (between Time 1 and Time 2 of the 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace

[11] See also Coffield et al (2007: 730) who reveal, on the basis of their TLRP funded research into the functioning of the Learning and Skills Council, that 'Sustainability—after the short-term funding ended— was a serious concern for ULRs and managers.'

[12] Finlay et al (2007: 239) have similarly commented on the negative impact of initiative funding on sustainability: 'reliance on initiative funding creates problems for sustainability when the source dries up or when all the learners eligible under the rules of the particular initiative funding stream have used up their entitlement'.

Learning' project) we found that in over half of sites, there was no manager in post who had any recollection of or knowledge about the courses which had taken place. (Wolf et al 2010)

Company employees were frequently subjected to pressure from line managers to miss sessions or abandon the course altogether in order to return to their work duties. This was particulary evident in those companies that lacked a culture of organisation-wide support for 'Skills for Life' provision.

For example, the personnel manager at the Weapons Defence Establishment, outlined (in February 2010) the consequences of her failure to establish an organisational consensus in favour of workplace 'Skills for Life' provision:

> The learners initially think the course is a good idea but then the line manager says there is insufficient cover and they won't come in…We have good management support at the top level but line managers at the local level are frequently resistant to training even when it is free of charge.

Providers also continue to face a range of perennial challenges relating to the difficulty of adapting 'Skills for Life' courses to complex shift patterns. As a 'Skills for Life' manager from Wakeham college in South East England mentioned in October 2009, 'Some courses are a real nightmare to run- it is difficult to find a course that suits all the students because they are all in different shifts. It is also difficult to fit the courses in with our normal working hours and the timetable of the college.'

Several representatives from providers commented that 'Skills for Life' funding arrangements (both before and after the onset of Train to Gain) make it very difficult to engage small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

As noted in previous research (Wolf et al, 2010) the vast majority of 'Skills for Life' courses were generic and were not tailored specifically to the workplace.

Findings from qualitative interviews revealed that those tutors who sought to relate the course to the workplace context usually embarked on this process of contextualisation on the basis of their own initiative. For example, a tutor at Manning Social Services encouraged the learners to fill in care plans on a computer. A tutor delivering a 'literacy and customer care' course at Milton bus company asked the learners to fill in incident report forms and sought to utilise

the 'Skills for Life' Materials for Embedded Learning. Otherwise, the embedded materials that have been developed by the 'Skills for Life' strategy were not utilized in any of the sites selected for in-depth qualitative research, underlining the need for more effective dissemination of these resources to providers and workplaces.[13]

Key challenges to the establishment of sustainable 'Skills for Life' provision (3): the impact of the recession and economic downturn.

The onset of the economic downturn has major implications for 'Skills for Life' workplace provision. Out of 55 sites involved in the ABSWL project, 8 sites had closed down altogether by the time of the completion of LLAKES follow-up research in May 2010 (6 as a result of the company falling into administration or being taken and 2 as a result of company rationalization). Research on the impact of previous recessions on training suggests that companies can respond to economic austerity in a variety of ways; from cutting back on spending on training to seeing the recession as an opportunity to devote more resources to training (Mason and Bishop, 2010, 37). Managers at FE colleges and training providers reported that it was becoming more difficult to run 'Skills for Life' courses within companies as a result of the economic downturn, since the difficulties of ensuring learners' attendance and retention were exacerbated. For example, a tutor at a college in South East England mentioned in 2010:

> We have noticed that companies are starting to become more and more reluctant to run these courses. People are working overtime so you don't get good attendance. We usually get good attendance at the beginning of the course and then it drops off towards the end. This especially happens when they are working double shifts.

'Skills for Life' provision within public sector organisations involved in the ABSWL has also been negatively affected by re-structuring in response to economic austerity. One training manager in a London local authority that had discontinued 'Skills for Life' provision explained the situation as follows in the autumn of 2009:

There is less money available for training because of the economic situation- nearly all directorates are being restructured. We are working towards quite significant cutbacks. I

[13] *'Skills for Life'* Materials for Embedded Learning have now been developed for a wide range of vocational areas. http://rwp.excellencegateway.org.uk/embeddedlearning/index.cfm

would like to bring back the courses but I can't hold up hope that that will be the case. If there was a major need it might be different. Even the unions aren't coming at us and saying 'why aren't you doing more for these people'.'

As in the private sector, problems relating to the attendance and retention of learners are exacerbated in the current economic climate. As one hospital administrator explained in November 2009: 'I have noticed that people are not so easily freed up for training. There is less time available for training and people can't be released so easily.'

Conclusion

The 'Skills for Life' national strategy has generated a complex 'ecology of learning' at policy level whereby unprecedented resources have been devoted to multiple and shifting funding channels. The byzantine and shifting funding landscape, with its concomitant bureaucracy and strong emphasis on target-bearing qualifications has militated against long-term sustainability at organisational level.

Those organisations that have managed to sustain provision have generally succeeded in integrating 'Skills for Life' courses within a broader 'ecology of learning' whereby there is both support and formal recognition for such provision within the organisation as a whole. The development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses within these organisations approximates (rather than complies fully with) the 'whole organisation' approaches advocated by 'Skills for Life' development agencies. Although these recommendations represent an optimum strategy for developing the capacity of organisations to deliver 'Skills for Life' provision, the 'third-order' significance of learning within the workplace means that it is in practice difficult to establish sustainability in most organisations. As noted above, the pressure of adapting courses to shift patterns, the diverging priorities of providers, training managers and line managers, as well as changes to companies and the impact of the economic downturn have presented major barriers to sustainable provision.

The narrowly focussed economic agenda underpinning the 'Skills for Life' national strategy is at variance with the widely ranging motivations underpinning organisational and individual engagement with literacy provision. Government declarations of a 'skills crisis' based on assumptions about the existence of large-scale deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills amongst lower-level employees have taken insufficient recognition of the variation of literacy practices amongst lower-level employees in differing organisational contexts as well as the

complex constitution of employee skills and competencies, which frequently rely on 'informal' methods of learning in differing workplace settings.

We have suggested that Michel de Certeau's work on quotidian social practices- and in particular his conceptual distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics'- provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the processes of adaptation and accommodation entailed in the implementation of this type of provision. Rather than explicitly subverting or rejecting dimensions of 'Skills for Life' provision, learners have 'made of' the opportunities afforded by these courses by using them with regard to ends and references that extend beyond the workplace and relate to their diverse and shifting life-styles in a manner that frequently compensates for previously negative educational experiences. In their bid to boost staff morale, foster a positive company ethos and enhance corporate solidarity, the majority of organisations have developed a broad 'strategic' terrain in which individuals have been able to deploy these 'tactical' engagements more extensively. This has relevance to the theme of sustainability in so far as the majority of organisations that have managed to sustain long-term provision have accorded official recognition to the value of learning for its own sake (for a variety of company-specific as well as altruistic considerations) and have therefore provided an institutional space for learners to pursue diverse interests and motivations in addition to addressing skills requirements in the workplace. The capacity of learners to insinuate a variety of personal motivations for learning into the company's 'strategic terrain' has therefore bolstered the long-term demand for these courses. Ultimately, however, the longer-term sustainability of such courses depends on the capacity of organisations to integrate 'Skills for Life' provision within the broader organisational infrastructure in order to cope adequately with the vagaries of funding together with shifting political priorities.

During the time-scale of our research, generous government funding has facilitated the capacity for workplace 'Skills for Life' provision to engage learners who have been failed by other forms of provision. The Coalition government, in response to adverse economic circumstances, has subsequently introduced more stringent arrangements for the funding of workplace Skills for Life provision; these include the abolition of preferential funding for literacy (but not numeracy) in the form of the 1.4 funding 'uplift' under Train to Gain as well as the removal of public funding for ESOL in the workplace (Skills Funding Agency: Guidance Note 6). In the current economic climate, it is likely that 'Skills for Life' provision

in its reduced form will be more tailored specifically to the workplace and will entail shorter more flexible courses. Such courses are likely to be justified on the basis of being more cost-effective but may not be accompanied by the wider social benefits that have been associated with the high-tide of government funding for workplace 'Skills for Life' provision.

[Appendix]

Skills for Life strategy (launched 2001)			**Train to Gain (launched September 2006)**
ABSWL Time 1 (2004-2006) Literacy assessments at start of course, structured interviews with learners, managers and tutors. Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) T1. In-depth interviews with sub-sample of learners, managers and tutors	**ABSWL Time 2** (Timing of data collection determined on a site-by-site basis in relation to T1) Literacy assessment 1 year after course ends. Follow up structured interviews with learners, managers and tutors. ELLI T2. Follow-up in-depth interviews with the sub-sample of learners, managers and tutors	**ABSWL Time 3** **(Timing of data collection determined on a site-by-site basis in relation to T1 and T2)** Literacy assessment 18 months after T2. Semi-personalised, structured interview with learners relating back to T2 results.	**LLAKES Strand 3 project 2: 2009-2011** Follow-up qualitative interviews with managers from the 53 sites involved in the ABSWL project. Follow-up qualitative interviews with providers involved in ABSWL project. Case-study research in organisations that have recently established provision in the Train to Gain era (focus on 'innovative' forms of SFL provision). Follow- up research with sub-sample of in-depth learners: learner biographies.

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