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Post-16 Skills

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The Education and Skills Committee

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Footnotes

In the footnotes for this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by 'Q' followed by the question number. References to written evidence are indicated by the page number as in 'Ev 12' or by reference to 'written evidence' followed by the name of the organisation or individual submitting it.

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Summary

The publication of the two Skills Strategy White Papers, the Further Education White Paper, and the commissioning of the Leitch Report represent a heightened policy interest in skills. The Committee commends the Government for its sustained focus on skills. It is vital that this policy focus is continued within the new Departmental structure, and that higher education is not allowed to dominate the work of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Skills and prosperity—a fundamental link?

We nevertheless raise a number of concerns about the direction of current policy. The Government's approach to skills is one predicated on a direct relationship between prosperity—both social and economic—and skills. Our evidence suggests that skills are only part of a very complex equation, and simply boosting training will not necessarily lead to increased prosperity—particularly in economic terms. What is needed is more coherent support for employers to develop their businesses *as a whole*, addressing skills needs alongside other issues such as capital investment, innovation and workforce planning. This should be coupled with a much stronger focus on management skills than is currently the case.

Improving the national stock of qualifications has been a central aim of skills policy—and Lord Leitch's ambitions are also framed in these terms. However, an increased national stock of qualifications will not necessarily be an accurate indicator of an increased national stock of skills. What is more, the tying of funding to courses leading to full qualifications goes directly against what many employers and individuals say would be of most benefit to them—'bite-sized' learning that can be built up over time. The new Qualifications and Credit Framework, which makes it possible to accumulate units over time is very welcome, but needs also to be accompanied by more flexible, responsive funding.

A coherent skills system?

The current infrastructure for delivering the Government's ambitions for skills is extremely complicated, and there is still significant work to be done to minimise overlaps between different intermediary bodies, reducing inefficiency and duplication of effort. A comprehensive review to map functions and funding flows across agencies is needed, as is a thorough value-for-money analysis of the system as a whole. This need not necessarily pave the way for further major institutional upheaval, but would allow evidence-based improvements and the release of resources over a period of time to tackle skill needs more effectively.

The system also often appears highly complex from a user perspective. Comprehensive adult Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is vital, but many people have little or no access to it. We therefore warmly welcome the Leitch Report's proposals to improve the system of adult IAG, through the Learndirect brand, and the Government's response. The Leitch Report is the most recent in a very long line of reviews identifying significant weaknesses in the IAG system and so it is essential that the Government demonstrates

absolute commitment to remedying this situation as a matter of urgency.

A demand-led system?

The Government's overarching ambition is move toward a system that is increasingly 'demand-led', meaning that what is provided in terms of skills training should meet the expressed needs of employers and individuals, as opposed to what it is most convenient for providers to offer. High expectations and significant resources are being attached to *Train to Gain* programme to realise this. While welcome in principle, *Train to Gain* cannot be described as truly 'demand-led', given the strict constraints on what is currently fundable.

We are particularly concerned by some of the evidence we have received on *Train to Gain* brokerage, which raises questions about quality and suggests that in some cases brokers may be succeeding only in adding an extra, unwelcome layer of bureaucracy to the process. Key partners—including some colleges—appear unconvinced by the substantial reliance on the current *Train to Gain* model. We are also concerned that much of what is funded under *Train to Gain* might otherwise be paid for by employers themselves.

It is crucial that funding of the skills 'infrastructure'—including brokers—is carefully targeted and demonstrably adding value. The Government and the LSC need to make explicit the criteria by which they are assessing the work of *Train to Gain* brokers and the steps they are taking to ensure value for money in this area.

Sector Skills Councils are presented as another key part of a demand-led mechanism, but they face real challenges in representing the views and needs of very diverse sectors, and of small and medium-sized employers in particular. Some also face capacity issues, especially regarding their ability to engage at local and regional levels. As such, they are unlikely to serve as an alternative to direct engagement between providers and businesses locally; the development of these sorts of relationships must be the subject of continued support and encouragement from Government.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly of all, is the issue of *raising*, not simply responding better to, demand from employers and individuals. Supply-side reforms are only likely to succeed if accompanied by sustained attention to the issue of increasing individuals' and employers' commitment to learning.

1 Introduction

1. The Committee announced its inquiry into post-16 skills on 30 November 2006, with the intention of considering the following key areas of skills policy:

- The underpinning principles of the Government's Skills Strategy to date—especially, the focus on training up to full 'level two'.
- The recommendations of Lord Sandy Leitch's report for the Treasury and how these should be taken forward.
- Supply-side issues: what were the typical experiences of those looking for skills training?
- The development of a so-called 'demand-led' system for skills.

We have received a considerable volume of evidence. Witnesses included:

- Professor Ewart Keep, University of Cardiff; Alan Wells, formerly of the Basic Skills Agency; Professor Lorna Unwin, Institute of Education;
- Liz Smith, Unionlearn; Hayley Pickles, USDAW; Ellie Russell, NUS; Clinton Ritchie, Lewisham College; Kenneth Aitchison, Prospect;
- Ms Clare Morley, Association of Accounting Technicians; Mr John Philpott, Chartered Institute of Personnel Development;
- Graham Moore, 157 Group; Mariane Cavalli, Croydon College; John Stone, Learning and Skills Network; Gareth Parry and David Knight, Rempoy; Duncan Shrubsole, and Richard Pace, Crisis;
- Dinah Caine, Skillset; Linda Florance, Skillfast-UK; Brian Wisdom, People 1st;
- Chris Humphries, City and Guilds; Isabel Sutcliffe, Edexcel; Greg Watson, OCR; John McNamara, British Institute of Innkeeping; Alan Stevenson, Food and Drink Qualifications;
- Dan Wright, Protocol Skills and Training; Simon Withey, VT Education and Skills;
- Steven Broomhead, North West Regional Development Agency; John Korzeniewski, North West Learning and Skills Council; Professor Frank Coffield, Institute of Education; Lee Hopley, EEF; and
- Ian Finney, Concept Mouldings Ltd; Diane Johnson, Eric Johnson of Northwich Ltd.

In addition, we received over 50 memoranda which have helped us with our inquiry.

2. On 26 June 2007, the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown MP, announced that the Department for Education and Skills would be replaced by two successor Departments, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). As a result, this Committee is to be dissolved

and its active inquiries will fall into abeyance. We have therefore decided to publish a short summary report outlining our key findings and conclusions to date. We comment on two main areas: firstly, the skills ‘system’ as it is currently experienced by users—e.g., employers, employees, individuals and communities; secondly, the key underlying principles of current policy—in particular:

- the Government’s understanding of the link between skills and improved prosperity;
- Moves to make skills provision more ‘demand-led’;
- The priority being placed on employer responsiveness, and the mechanisms being used to achieve this—such as *Train to Gain* and Sector Skills Councils.

3. We would like to extend our thanks to our three Specialist Advisers to this inquiry—Professor Ewart Keep, University of Cardiff, Chris Hughes CBE, formerly Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Development Agency, and Professor Alison Wolf, King’s College, London. We are also very grateful to the National Audit Office for their assistance in producing a series of detailed skills ‘maps’ illustrating the complex structure of the post-16 skills sector.

2 A coherent skills system?

A welcome policy focus on skills

4. The Government's Skills Strategy was launched in July 2003, with the publication of *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential*.¹ This was followed in March 2005 by a White Paper, *Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*.² Both documents had two central themes: firstly, increasing national skill levels to improve economic and social prospects, and secondly, making skills provision more responsive to the needs of employers and individuals.

5. In November 2006, HM Treasury published Lord Sandy Leitch's Review (hereafter the Leitch Report) of future skill needs to 2020. This recommended the establishment of more ambitious qualification targets—for example, reaching 90% of adults qualified to at least level two (up from 69% in 2005). It also recommended strengthening of so-called 'demand-led' mechanisms—for example, bolstering the role of Sector Skills Councils and a further roll-out of the *Train to Gain* scheme.³ On Wednesday 18 July, the Government published its response to the Leitch Report in the form of the document *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, which constituted a formal acceptance of the majority of the report's recommendations.⁴

6. The publication of the two Skills Strategy White Papers, the Further Education White Paper, and the commissioning of the Leitch Report represent a heightened policy interest in skills. The Committee commends the Government for its sustained focus on this area. It is imperative that in the new Departmental structure, skills policy remains a central concern and that higher education is not allowed to dominate. A premium should also be placed on joined-up working between the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, particularly considering that overall 14-19 policy and funding falls within the remit of the former, but apprenticeship funding will sit with the latter.

The National Skills Strategy and the Leitch Report

Skills and prosperity—a fundamental link?

7. A central premise of Government skills policy to date, which Leitch endorses, is that improved skills, signalled by an increased national stock of qualifications, will lead to increased prosperity—both for individuals and for business. However, many of those from whom we have taken evidence have suggested that the link—while probably present—is not as straightforward as it may seem; in the case of workplaces, it is clear that much depends both on how effectively skills are used in the workplace and how effectively skills

1 DfES, *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential: Individuals, Employers, Nation*, July 2003, CM 5810

2 DfES, *Skills: Getting on at Business, Getting on at Work*, March 2005, CM 6483-I

3 Sector Skills Councils were established from 2003, to research and represent employer needs and demands, and secure employer influence on the skills system. Train to Gain provides a skills brokerage service to employers, and provides free training in certain cases.

4 DIUS, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, 18 July 2007, CM 7181

development is tied to wider workforce development and other business sustainability issues— for example, investment in capital projects and research and design. John Philpott of the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development told us:

“There is one way forward, and this comes back to [the need for ...] broadening the public policy debate beyond skills and qualifications *per se* to more of a workplace development strategy [...]. I do not feel that we have really got that far in the public policy conversation on this. Certainly, Leitch, whether you like it or not, has not taken us much further down that road than we have been for many years.”⁵

Similarly, Professor Ewart Keep of SKOPE argued:

“The [...] thing that is missing completely from Leitch is anything to do with economic development and tying upskilling and economic development together. It is very interesting, in the Leitch final report, in 195 pages, that the RDAs get a single mention, and that single mention is to do with skills forecasting, it is not to do with economic development [...]. I think that one of the biggest weaknesses we have is our inability to get skills policies aligned more closely with how we think about economic development, because until we do a lot of the money we invest in upskilling probably will be wasted, because it will not be used properly in the workplace. I think Leitch actually is quite misleading and an awful lot of effort will go into chasing targets, which we can meet but will not transform the economy necessarily.”⁶

8. The relationship between skills and prosperity is more complex than is acknowledged in recent skills strategy documents or in the Leitch Report. Proceeding down a policy route which treats skills as an ‘independent variable’ is unlikely to lead to the hoped for levels of economic prosperity and sustainability. What is urgently needed is support for employers to develop their businesses as a whole, addressing skills needs alongside wider sustainability issues such as capital investment, innovation and workforce planning. Colleges and other providers should be further encouraged to develop more comprehensive support for their local businesses. Also needed is a stronger focus on developing management skills *per se*—an area our witnesses have identified as particularly weak in the UK and largely neglected to date in policy.

9. The Government’s stated aim is to raise skill *and qualification* levels, in order to increase prosperity; in recent policy documents the two often appear to be seen as one and the same. The Leitch report continues this trend, quantifying future ambitions for skills in terms of the national stock of qualifications. Such an approach has historically resulted in policy priorities which skew funding and provision toward ‘full qualifications’—something that has concerned very many of those from whom we took evidence, including the 157 Group of Colleges, who told us: “the largest single complaint from employers [is] that unless they sign up their staff for a full qualification then they can receive no funding

5 Q 140

6 Professor Keep also pointed out to us that countries identified in the Leitch Report as having higher levels of skills than the UK—for example Canada and New Zealand—did not necessarily have higher productivity levels, perhaps suggesting that the relationship between qualification stocks and economic performance was more complex than might at first appear.

support.”⁷ Currently, a new credit-based Qualifications and Curriculum Framework is being piloted: this aims to provide a framework for ‘bite-sized’ chunks of learning, which can be built up into recognised qualifications over time. The Qualifications and Curriculum Agency say one of the benefits of such a system will be that “employers who might not need the full skills portfolio offered by a particular qualification, can offer relevant units to their employees who can gain credit in a nationally recognised system and contribute to their ‘learner achievement record’.”⁸

10. Several of those submitting evidence also argued that not only could focusing on full qualifications distort what was provided but also could lead to an inaccurate measure of ‘progress’. Alan Wells, formerly Director of the Basic Skills Agency, told us that in his experience, qualifications were sometimes being used to certify existing skills (in literacy and numeracy in this case) and that the process was therefore one of ‘target-chasing’:

“Using qualifications gained leads to double counting. Furthermore, there is some evidence that adults who had few if any difficulties with literacy and/or numeracy but have taken the National Tests in Literacy and/or Numeracy are counted as ‘no longer in need’ in claims made for the success of Skills for Life [...] this is supported by the recent report by the National Audit Office [NAO] that found that the data system for assessing progress towards achieving the aim of the Strategy [...] is ‘not fit for purpose’. It was one of only 5 Government targets of the 53 reviewed by the NAO that was awarded a ‘red traffic light’ symbol.”⁹

11. The targeting of funding on particular kinds of full qualification-bearing courses makes it difficult for providers to offer the kinds of learning employers often say they want. While there may be clear reasons for maintaining a commitment to well-defined qualification-bearing courses—not least issues of quality and portability for employees—a more flexible way of targeting funding is needed urgently, allowing the accumulation of ‘bite-sized’ learning which can be built up into a portfolio over time. In this respect, the move toward a credit-based system is very welcome and should be accompanied by parallel changes in terms of what is fundable.

‘Levels’

Currently, Government funding is focused at level two—notionally equivalent to five GCSEs at A*–C grades—which is identified as the “basic platform of skills for employability.”¹⁰ The Leitch Report analysis suggested that over time, the proportion of jobs requiring lower-level skills would decrease and so the focus should be shifted progressively to level three qualifications. This proposal has received a mixed response in the evidence we received. Many clearly felt that the focus on higher skill levels was sensible, with the Association of Colleges saying the Leitch Report “rightly focuses attention on the need for more people to have skills at Level 3 and 4.”¹¹

7 Ev 63

8 Written evidence from Qualifications and Curriculum Agency

9 Ev 1

10 “Government calls on employers to sign ‘skills pledge’”, DfES press release, 2007/0022, 8 Feb 2007

11 Ev 71

12. However, others have questioned Leitch’s assessment that low-skilled jobs will virtually disappear in the near future, therefore questioning also to what extent it is appropriate to shift targets (and funding) toward higher-level skills. The Business Services Association told us:

“While we accept the broad thrust of the Leitch Report on raising skills levels to NVQ Level 3, we are firmly of the view that Government’s focus on Level 2 qualifications is correct. The jobs currently being undertaken within the services sector are not going to go away; indeed it is often the case in this sector that Level 1 qualifications are the most appropriate, either as a first step into training or where the jobs concerned cannot be assessed against Level 2 criteria—the role of kitchen porter is a typical example. Within this sector it is unlikely that skills levels will progress to Level 3 within the timescale proposed in the Leitch Report. We are concerned that, if the qualification levels increase without a concomitant upgrade in the level of job undertaken—with appropriate increases in remuneration—employees will become disillusioned. This, in turn, would be counter-productive to the laudable aims of the Report.”¹²

13. There also remains the question of how applicable nationally derived targets are likely to be at the local or sectoral level. Steven Broomhead of the North West Regional Development Agency told us:

“We have had quite a lot of discussion with our sponsoring department, the DTI, about this very issue. Each RDA has its own regional economic strategy and needs and, frankly, we need to reflect the fact that if there are different economic issues and needs there must be different sets of targets in different regions. Certainly, the employment and skills issues are very different in the North West from what they are in the North East. [...] We need a system of variable geometry which also fits with targets. I think that we are now at a stage with the sub-national review being carried out by Government as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review where we can have a discussion about national and regional targets so we can have a much more appropriate set of arrangements than we have at the moment.”¹³

14. A separate issue is that of possible unintended consequences for individuals who, for whatever reason, are very far from achieving at level two or three. Gareth Parry of Remploy told us:

“I think the targets in Leitch are so ambitious there is a danger that everybody will go for demonstrating progress towards those targets, and, therefore, there is a danger that the people who are most likely to achieve level two will be focused upon first and that those people who are further away will get forgotten about. If there is a longer-term strategy for that candidate group and that learning group, that is fine, but the danger is that everybody will rush towards the quick wins, if I can use the phrase, and

12 Written evidence from the Business Services Association

13 Q 645

that the people in need of most support will be so far behind over a period of time that there is too big a gap to catch up in due course.”¹⁴

15. **Predicting skills needs to 2020 is not a simple task—some would argue it is impossible to do with any degree of accuracy. It is imperative that policy decisions taken on the basis of the Leitch analysis are sufficiently flexible to accommodate a wide variety of skills requirements that are present at local and sectoral levels. Also, if the decision is taken to refocus in the long-term on level three, the rights of individuals who are still a very long way from this point must be protected, and the temptation to achieve ‘quick wins’ by rapidly ‘qualifying’ those near the threshold must be avoided.**

16. **The Government should also look urgently at the practicalities of introducing more provision at levels three and four, especially in light of evidence from London and the South East on the difficulties of establishing an acceptable level of cost-sharing between employers, individuals and the state. There also needs to be a recognition of the need for closer working at the regional and sub-regional levels with Regional Development Agencies, in order for differing local priorities to be met, and further devolution of funding to ensure sufficient flexibility to meet local needs.**

Adult learning

17. In the context of discussions about priorities for funding, several witnesses raised with the issue of the contraction of non-qualification-bearing courses for adults and ‘first steps’ provision designed to entice people back into learning. NIACE told us:

“There is [...] a gap in present provision to help people across the threshold into further education and training. There is considerable evidence that many adults need to develop their motivation and confidence before being ready to commit to a substantial course of study. Such work, which reached its high-point in Access to HE courses for adults but also included other outreach programmes is under threat as a result of LSC decisions about short-course funding. Arrangements to preserve some ‘first steps’ work within Personal and Community Development Learning is not an adequate solution.”¹⁵

18. In our report on further education in 2006, we expressed grave concern about a likely loss of adult learning places as an unintended consequence of funding priorities.¹⁶ NIACE estimated in May 2007 that around 500,000 fewer adults were learning in 2006-07 than in the previous year.¹⁷ **We believe the Government’s promise to maintain current levels of expenditure on personal and community development learning, and on other ‘first-step’, non-qualification-bearing provision, falls far short of what is required and will do nothing to redress the recent substantial fall in the number of adults learning. We are particularly concerned about the potential negative impact on the most disadvantaged individuals, including disabled people and those with the very lowest level of skills.**

14 Q 354

15 Written evidence from NIACE

16 Education and Skills Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2005–06, *Further Education*, HC 649

17 NIACE survey for Adult Learners’ Week, reported at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6666553.stm>

There needs to be an urgent review of how to best support the development of soft and enabling skills for older learners. This is important in promoting equity and equality, facilitating progression, and meeting the demanding targets Leitch and others have identified for 2020. The demographic situation is such that adult learning and up-skilling will be a very important means of meeting these targets.

19. We received similar evidence concerning the availability of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision. John Stone, a former college Principal (now at the Learning and Skills Network) argued that in recent years, the focus on level two targets had led to some colleges cutting places:

“The figures at my old college, the cut next year is £1.4 million, they believe, and that is 1,000 ESOL learners, and we are talking about Somali women living at home, with no basic skills, who are completely isolated by their lack of English, with all that means for social cohesion. Currently they have the students, the demand led is there for that, and they have been asked essentially to replace that with a stretch target of an additional 450 Level 2 students for which currently they do not have demand. I think these are distortions you get when targets are set outside the system, in the Treasury, and then ripple down through the system and create what is an unintended effect. The Government does not want to hurt Somali women living at home but actually wants ESOL to be a priority; but this is the impact of a rigid target system.”¹⁸

From September 2007, there will be no automatic entitlement to free ESOL classes, with fee remission only available automatically to individuals on means-tested benefits. Additionally, adult asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their claim will no longer be able to access free ESOL provision, except in cases where they have been waiting for a period longer than six months. **One of the unintended consequences of level two targets appears to have been a contraction of ESOL provision in some areas; the new funding rules for September 2007 risk putting ESOL classes beyond the reach of some other individuals. This is deeply concerning and we urge the Government to review the funding arrangements for ESOL as a matter of urgency.**

The skills ‘system’

Too many intermediaries?

20. As part of our inquiry, we asked the National Audit Office to compile a ‘map’ of the organisations and bodies with roles in skills delivery and planning. This proved to be a complex task, resulting in five separate diagrams (printed as part of the written evidence for this inquiry). Throughout the inquiry, we have explored with witnesses whether the current system, viewed as a whole, makes sense and represents the best use of resources. Some expressed very strong views that this was absolutely not the case. The National Forum of Engineering Centres told us:

“Confusion reigns throughout the sector, so it is hardly surprising that the public does not understand who is doing what and why. The existence of so many

intermediaries, LSC, HEFCE, QIA, Ofsted, LSN, SSCs, National Skills Academies, RDAs and myriad award bodies, is both evidence of the UK's lack of joined-up thinking, and a perpetuator of the system's blurred responsibilities and accountability. To give just one example, both LSC and HEFCE fund the Higher Apprenticeship framework, while quality assurance involves both Ofsted and QAA."¹⁹

21. One point made repeatedly was that while complexity may be to an extent inevitable, what was important was that organisations had clear and well-defined functions, as KPMG emphasised:

“A simplification of the whole education and training, skills and economic planning infrastructure is needed, so that the money available is used to greatest effect on tackling skills issues rather than supporting major infrastructural requirements in organisations where many roles and tasks overlap or compete.”²⁰

22. However, Professor Frank Coffield of the Institute of Education told us he did not think wholesale change was the solution:

“We do not have one coherent system; we have a sector which is unbelievably complex. The first and obvious conclusion I reached when I looked at it three years ago was that we needed simplification and rationalisation. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that more change would be a mistake. I think that a cost benefit analysis must take place before any further change is introduced to this sector [...] every time you restructure you lose two to three years. You are diverted from the main tasks by the meeting of targets. I think that the heart of the system is teaching and learning. [...] learners [...] are supposedly the beneficiaries of all this public money. They are the people who are neglected. There is endless talk about the structures, roles and responsibilities of organisations, but what we should really be talking about is: how do the most disadvantaged learners get on in this sector?”²¹

23. We accept that a degree of organisational complexity in the skills system is unavoidable, but there is still work to be done to reduce overlaps between different bodies, and tackling the resulting inefficiency and duplication of effort. While the Leitch Report has addressed this issue in part, we believe there would be merit in a more comprehensive review to map functions and funding flows across agencies, along with a value-for-money analysis. This need not necessarily pave the way for further major institutional upheaval, but could assist in the process of making incremental, evidence-based improvements and releasing money over a period of time to tackle skill needs more effectively.

24. One area we have taken a particular interest in is the concept of *Train to Gain* brokers. Brokers are intended to mediate between employers (particularly, SMEs) and providers, matching training needs to what is available locally. While many praised the brokerage system in principle, there was concern that in some cases, brokers may simply be

19 Written evidence from the National Forum of Engineering Centres

20 Written evidence from KPMG

21 Qq 697–698

replicating the work providers would have carried out themselves, or were being employed ‘after the event’ as a formality, simply in order to draw down funding. Mariane Cavalli of Croydon College told us:

“We have got issues now, for example, where we are talking directly with employers who still want us to do courses and provide training for them, but we have to say ‘Go to the brokers.’ They [the employers] *may* come back through the broker system, they may *not* come back through the broker system.[...] There are very fundamental issues, on the capacity and the strength and, I think, the connections which the current broker services have. They are continuing to be funded, of course, but I think there are issues about what they are being funded for and how we are quality-assuring them, and how we can seriously get behind them to make sure that together we deliver the Train to Gain agenda.”²²

We also received evidence that the bureaucracy involved in signing up a learner for *Train to Gain* and other forms of learning could be time-consuming. Dan Wright of Protocol Skills told us:

“I can confirm that on a paper based signup 14 forms are required. The electronic processes we have introduced in Yorkshire and Humberside have reduced the total number of forms to 5, which includes 1 paper document (Health & Safety). The electronic system gives huge advantages in the reduction of administration and bureaucracy and is welcomed by the learner and the employer. However, I can confirm that we still do not have authority to proceed with electronic signature.”²³

25. We are deeply concerned by some of the evidence we have received on *Train to Gain* brokerage, which raises questions about quality and suggests that in some cases brokers may be succeeding only in adding an extra, unwelcome, layer of bureaucracy to the process. We are also concerned that much of what is being funded under *Train to Gain* might otherwise be paid for by employers. The fact that key partners—including some colleges—appear unconvinced by the substantial reliance on the *Train to Gain* model should serve as a strong warning sign that changes may be required. It is not clear how brokers assist in the process of developing close and sustainable relationships between providers and their local businesses. These types of relationships are likely to be vital for raising skills levels in local communities and while *Train to Gain* clearly has a role to play, any tendency to depict the scheme as the main means of engaging with businesses should be resisted.

26. As we noted earlier, it is crucial that funding of the skills ‘infrastructure’—including brokers—is carefully targeted and demonstrably adding value. The Government and the LSC need to make explicit the criteria by which they are assessing the work of *Train to Gain* brokers, and ensure there is adequate training in place for brokers to maximise their effectiveness. We also consider that progress on reducing bureaucracy and paperwork accompanying the sign-up and monitoring of new learners needs to be significantly accelerated.

22 Q 204, emphasis added.

23 Ev 106

Navigating the system

27. Early on in our inquiry, we heard evidence from Union Learning Representatives on the realities of navigating the skills system on behalf of others. Hayley Pickles of USDAW described what this meant for her in practice:

“What I have to do is get in touch with all the providers in my area, find them all, find what courses they are putting on and I have to repeatedly go back, survey the members of staff. Also I work in a regeneration area, so I work with the community as well, and then I have to do sheets: what do they want to learn, when do they want to learn it and how do they you want to learn it? I have to collate all that information, and it takes quite a bit of time, and then go and find the providers for best value.”²⁴

Subsequent witnesses confirmed that for individuals and employees, finding out what was available in terms of skills training was often not a straightforward task.

28. It is unsurprising, therefore, that we received a significant volume of evidence agreeing with the analysis in the Leitch report that adult Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services were extremely patchy—and in some cases completely non-existent—and were therefore in urgent need of improvement. For example, NIACE told us that:

“the experience of adults seeking skills training is becoming less satisfactory in comparison to previous years. One of the most positive proposals made by Lord Leitch was to establish a national careers service for adults in England. This, along with the current review of adult IAG, may finally succeed in providing a stronger focus for work than has been the case in recent years during which learndirect, locally-contracted nextstep services and Jobcentre Plus have not always worked with as much synergy and seamlessness as might be expected.”²⁵

29. Our evidence suggests that finding one’s way around the skills system is often far from straightforward; comprehensive Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is vitally important, but currently many people have little or no access to it. We therefore warmly welcome the Leitch Report’s proposals to improve the system of adult IAG, through the Learndirect brand, and the Government’s response to it. This is the most recent in a very long line of reports that have identified significant weaknesses in the IAG system and so it is essential that the Government now moves quickly toward implementation. The Union Learning Representative system also deserves continued support, in recognition of its crucial role in liaising with employers, signposting, and encouraging employees in the workplace, and, if effectively linked in, could play a crucial role in the remodelled and expanded IAG service.

30. Many who would benefit from learning need intensive one-on-one support and encouragement to re-enter the skills training system. Services such as Crisis Skylight and Remploy’s high-street brokerage officers—from whom we also took evidence—play a

24 Q 92

25 Written evidence from NIACE

crucial role in this respect, guiding and supporting the most disadvantaged individuals back into learning.

3 A demand-led and employer-led system?

31. The Government intends that skills training will become more ‘demand-led’, meaning more responsive to the needs of individuals and employers. *Train to Gain* is one of the Government’s main ‘demand-led’ mechanisms, and is to become one of the main mechanisms for distributing adult vocational funds. In its response to the Leitch Report, the Government confirmed that it planned to invest over £900 million in *Train to Gain* by 2010/11.²⁶ As with other aspects of provision, we heard many concerns that what was fundable was in fact too narrowly defined. John Stone of the Learning and Skills Network told us:

“it is the sort of demand-led you get in your Russian supermarket, you can have anything you like as long as it is Level 2, anything as long as it is potatoes, whereas employers, Sector Skills Councils, providers, are all screaming actually ‘This is not what people want.’”²⁷

32. Recently, the Government has been trialling *Train to Gain* pilots at level three in two local areas. Training in these pilots was not originally free, but required a 50% employer contribution. The 157 Group’s perception was that these pilots had struggled to date:

“There is much evidence that despite the demonstrable value of level 3 qualifications, many industries and individuals are prepared to leave their qualifications at level 2. This is particularly pronounced in construction and service sectors such as retail, hairdressing and catering. There is a culture of good enough [...] The level 3 Train 2 Gain trial in the West Midlands and the North West has been a near disaster as it attempts to persuade level 3 students to pay 50% of the fees. Initial enrolments were minute. With ministerial support the rates have now been reduced to about 1/3rd. The effectiveness of this move is currently being tested.”²⁸

33. The Government aspires to a ‘demand-led’ skills system. While mechanisms for making the system more employer-facing such as *Train to Gain* are welcome in principle, they cannot unconditionally be described as ‘demand-led’, given the strict constraints on what is currently fundable. Also at issue is *raising*, as well as responding to, demand from employers and individuals—and the early experiences of the level three *Train to Gain* pilots appear to demonstrate the challenges inherent in this.

Sector Skills Councils

34. Sector Skills Councils are viewed by Government as one key mechanism for making skills training more ‘demand-led’ by capturing and articulating employer needs. The DfES told us:

26 DIUS, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, 18 July 2007, CM 7181

27 Q 203

28 Ev 63

“SSCs [sector skills councils] provide a voice for employers to have their say in identifying skills priorities and the training and qualifications needed for their sector. [...] [Sector Skills] agreements are a key mechanism for articulating skills demand and underpin the move to a more demand-led system of education and training as set out in the Skills Strategy”.²⁹

35. The Leitch Report report recommended increasing the influence of SSCs—for example, through giving them the power to determine which vocational qualifications should attract funding. However, the evidence on performance to date is mixed, and it is clear from our evidence that their remit, role and reach is still developing. A more fundamental concern is the capacity of Sector Skills Councils, as small organisations covering large, internally complex sectors, to go beyond a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to representing employer needs. Chris Humphries of City and Guilds summed this up by identifying the risk as one of SSCs responding to heterogeneity of demand with “a homogeneous set of solutions”.³⁰

36. Sector Skills Councils face real challenges in representing the views and needs of very diverse sectors, and of small and medium-sized employers in particular. As such, they are unlikely to serve as an alternative to direct engagement between providers and businesses at the local level; this must be the subject of continued and coherent support from Government. We received some evidence that Sector Skills Councils were sometimes struggling to maintain engagement locally and regionally. If they are to have credibility with employers, Sector Skills Councils must be appropriately resourced to do their jobs rather than having to spend significant amounts of time on peripheral revenue-raising activities. This is especially true as they take on the extra responsibilities which Leitch proposed for them.

37. We see an inherent risk that requiring Sector Skills Councils to sign off vocational qualifications could actually act to make the system more bureaucratic and consequently less responsive to employer needs. The Government should lay out how this process is likely to work in practice, and the timescales involved. We also urge the new Commission for Employment and Skills to keep this area under review.

38. Inevitably the decision to focus on a small range of key issues in this report has meant that other issues, on which we received considerable amounts of evidence, have not been addressed in the depth they would have been had the inquiry come to its natural conclusion. **We recommend that the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee continues on our inquiry, taking concluding oral evidence as necessary, and producing a report focusing on issues not covered in depth to date, including: Apprenticeships, including adult apprenticeships; up-skilling and re-skilling of adults in general; the regional dimensions of skills policy; in-house company training schemes; funding of skills provision; and policy on the development of management skills.**

29 Written evidence from the DfES

30 Q 557

Conclusions and recommendations

A welcome policy focus on skills

1. The publication of the two Skills Strategy White Papers, the Further Education White Paper, and the commissioning of the Leitch Report represent a heightened policy interest in skills. The Committee commends the Government for its sustained focus on this area. It is imperative that in the new Departmental structure, skills policy remains a central concern and that higher education is not allowed to dominate. A premium should also be placed on joined-up working between the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, particularly considering that overall 14-19 policy and funding falls within the remit of the former, but apprenticeship funding will sit with the latter. (Paragraph 6)

The National Skills Strategy and the Leitch Report

2. The relationship between skills and prosperity is more complex than is acknowledged in recent skills strategy documents or in the Leitch Report. Proceeding down a policy route which treats skills as an ‘independent variable’ is unlikely to lead to the hoped for levels of economic prosperity and sustainability. What is urgently needed is support for employers to develop their businesses as a whole, addressing skills needs alongside wider sustainability issues such as capital investment, innovation and workforce planning. Colleges and other providers should be further encouraged to develop more comprehensive support for their local businesses. Also needed is a stronger focus on developing management skills per se—an area our witnesses have identified as particularly weak in the UK and largely neglected to date in policy. (Paragraph 8)
3. The targeting of funding on particular kinds of full qualification-bearing courses makes it difficult for providers to offer the kinds of learning employers often say they want. While there may be clear reasons for maintaining a commitment to well-defined qualification-bearing courses—not least issues of quality and portability for employees—a more flexible way of targeting funding is needed urgently, allowing the accumulation of ‘bite-sized’ learning which can be built up into a portfolio over time. In this respect, the move toward a credit-based system is very welcome and should be accompanied by parallel changes in terms of what is fundable. (Paragraph 11)
4. Predicting skills needs to 2020 is not a simple task—some would argue it is impossible to do with any degree of accuracy. It is imperative that policy decisions taken on the basis of the Leitch analysis are sufficiently flexible to accommodate a wide variety of skills requirements that are present at local and sectoral levels. Also, if the decision is taken to refocus in the long-term on level three, the rights of individuals who are still a very long way from this point must be protected, and the temptation to achieve ‘quick wins’ by rapidly ‘qualifying’ those near the threshold must be avoided. (Paragraph 15)

5. The Government should also look urgently at the practicalities of introducing more provision at levels three and four, especially in light of evidence from London and the South East on the difficulties of establishing an acceptable level of cost-sharing between employers, individuals and the state. There also needs to be a recognition of the need for closer working at the regional and sub-regional levels with Regional Development Agencies, in order for differing local priorities to be met, and further devolution of funding to ensure sufficient flexibility to meet local needs. (Paragraph 16)
6. We believe the Government's promise to maintain current levels of expenditure on personal and community development learning, and on other 'first-step', non-qualification-bearing provision, falls far short of what is required and will do nothing to redress the recent substantial fall in the number of adults learning. We are particularly concerned about the potential negative impact on the most disadvantaged individuals, including disabled people and those with the very lowest level of skills. There needs to be an urgent review of how to best support the development of soft and enabling skills for older learners. This is important in promoting equity and equality, facilitating progression, and meeting the demanding targets Leitch and others have identified for 2020. The demographic situation is such that adult learning and up-skilling will be a very important means of meeting these targets. (Paragraph 18)
7. One of the unintended consequences of level two targets appears to have been a contraction of ESOL provision in some areas; the new funding rules for September 2007 risk putting ESOL classes beyond the reach of some other individuals. This is deeply concerning and we urge the Government to review the funding arrangements for ESOL as a matter of urgency. (Paragraph 19)

The skills 'system'

8. We accept that a degree of organisational complexity in the skills system is unavoidable, but there is still work to be done to reduce overlaps between different bodies, and tackling the resulting inefficiency and duplication of effort. While the Leitch Report has addressed this issue in part, we believe there would be merit in a more comprehensive review to map functions and funding flows across agencies, along with a value-for-money analysis. This need not necessarily pave the way for further major institutional upheaval, but could assist in the process of making incremental, evidence-based improvements and releasing money over a period of time to tackle skill needs more effectively. (Paragraph 23)
9. We are deeply concerned by some of the evidence we have received on Train to Gain brokerage, which raises questions about quality and suggests that in some cases brokers may be succeeding only in adding an extra, unwelcome, layer of bureaucracy to the process. We are also concerned that much of what is being funded under Train to Gain might otherwise be paid for by employers. The fact that key partners—including some colleges—appear unconvinced by the substantial reliance on the Train to Gain model should serve as a strong warning sign that changes may be required. It is not clear how brokers assist in the process of developing close and sustainable relationships between providers and their local

businesses. These types of relationships are likely to be vital for raising skills levels in local communities and while Train to Gain clearly has a role to play, any tendency to depict the scheme as the main means of engaging with businesses should be resisted. (Paragraph 25)

10. As we noted earlier, it is crucial that funding of the skills ‘infrastructure’—including brokers—is carefully targeted and demonstrably adding value. The Government and the LSC need to make explicit the criteria by which they are assessing the work of Train to Gain brokers, and ensure there is adequate training in place for brokers to maximise their effectiveness. We also consider that progress on reducing bureaucracy and paperwork accompanying the sign-up and monitoring of new learners needs to be significantly accelerated. (Paragraph 26)
11. Our evidence suggests that finding one’s way around the skills system is often far from straightforward; comprehensive Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is vitally important, but currently many people have little or no access to it. We therefore warmly welcome the Leitch Report’s proposals to improve the system of adult IAG, through the Learndirect brand, and the Government’s response to it. This is the most recent in a very long line of reports that have identified significant weaknesses in the IAG system and so it is essential that the Government now moves quickly toward implementation. The Union Learning Representative system also deserves continued support, in recognition of its crucial role in liaising with employers, signposting, and encouraging employees in the workplace, and, if effectively linked in, could play a crucial role in the remodelled and expanded IAG service. (Paragraph 29)

A demand-led and employer-led system?

12. The Government aspires to a ‘demand-led’ skills system. While mechanisms for making the system more employer-facing such as Train to Gain are welcome in principle, they cannot unconditionally be described as ‘demand-led’, given the strict constraints on what is currently fundable. Also at issue is raising, as well as responding to, demand from employers and individuals—and the early experiences of the level three Train to Gain pilots appear to demonstrate the challenges inherent in this. (Paragraph 33)
13. Sector Skills Councils face real challenges in representing the views and needs of very diverse sectors, and of small and medium-sized employers in particular. As such, they are unlikely to serve as an alternative to direct engagement between providers and businesses at the local level; this must be the subject of continued and coherent support from Government. We received some evidence that Sector Skills Councils were sometimes struggling to maintain engagement locally and regionally. If they are to have credibility with employers, Sector Skills Councils must be appropriately resourced to do their jobs rather than having to spend significant amounts of time on peripheral revenue-raising activities. This is especially true as they take on the extra responsibilities which Leitch proposed for them. (Paragraph 36)

14. We see an inherent risk that requiring Sector Skills Councils to sign off vocational qualifications could actually act to make the system more bureaucratic and consequently less responsive to employer needs. The Government should lay out how this process is likely to work in practice, and the timescales involved. We also urge the new Commission for Employment and Skills to keep this area under review. (Paragraph 37)
15. We recommend that the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee continues on our inquiry, taking concluding oral evidence as necessary, and producing a report focusing on issues not covered in depth to date, including: Apprenticeships, including adult apprenticeships; up-skilling and re-skilling of adults in general; the regional dimensions of skills policy; in-house company training schemes; funding of skills provision; and policy on the development of management skills. (Paragraph 38)

Formal minutes

Monday 23 July 2007

Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Mr David Chaytor
Mr Gordon Marsden

Stephen Williams

Post-16 Skills

The Committee considered this matter.

Draft Report, proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 38 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Ninth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Ordered, That memoranda be appended to the report.

Ordered, That the memoranda be reported to the House.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 25 July at 9.15 am

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Professor Ewart Keep , Deputy Director of the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, Cardiff University, Professor Lorna Unwin , Professor of Vocational Education, Institute of Education and Mr Alan Wells OBE , Director of the Basic Skills Agency 1978 to 2006	Ev 6
Wednesday 28 February 2007	
Ms Liz Smith , Director, Unionlearn, Ms Hayley Pickles , USDAW Union Learning Rep, Tesco Scarborough, Ms Ellie Russell , Vice President, Further Education, National Union of Students, Mr Kenneth Aitchison , Prospect Union Learning Rep and Head of Professional Development, Institute of Field Archaeologists, and Mr Clinton Ritchie , Lewisham College	Ev 35
Ms Clare Morley , Director of Education and Training, Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), and Mr John Philpott , Chief Economist, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)	Ev 49
Monday 26 March 2007	
Ms Mariane Cavalli , Principal, Croydon College, Mr Graham Moore OBE , Principal, Stoke-on-Trent College, and Treasurer of the 157 Group, and Mr John Stone , Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Network	Ev 80
Mr Dan Wright , Managing Director, Protocol Skills and Training, and Mr Simon Withey , Managing Director, VT Education and Skills	Ev 97
Wednesday 28 March 2007	
Mr Gareth Parry , Head of Learning, and Mr David Knight , Head of Group Marketing Strategy, Remploy, and Mr Duncan Shrubsole , Director of Policy and Research, and Mr Richard Pace , Head of Crisis Skylight, Crisis	Ev 114
Monday 14 May 2007	
Ms Dinah Caine , Chief Executive, Skillset, Ms Linda Florance , Chief Executive, Skillfast-UK, and Mr Brian Wisdom , Chief Executive, People 1st	Ev 144
Monday 21 May 2007	
Mr Chris Humphries CBE , Chief Executive, City and Guilds, Ms Isabel Sutcliffe , Director of Qualifications and Accreditation, Edexcel, Mr Greg Watson , Chief Executive, OCR, Mr John McNamara , Chief Executive, British Institute of Innkeeping and Mr Alan Stevenson OBE , President, Food and Drink Qualifications	Ev 178

Monday 4 June 2007

Mr Steven Broomhead, Chief Executive, North West Regional Development Agency, and **Mr John Korzeniewski**, Regional Director, North West Learning and Skills Council Ev 208

Professor Frank Coffield, Institute of Education, and **Ms Lee Hopley**, Senior Economist, EEF, the manufacturers' organisation Ev 224

Wednesday 20 June 2007

Mr Ian Finney, Group Managing Director, Concept Mouldings Ltd and **Mrs Diane Johnson**, Director, Eric Johnson of Northwich Ltd Ev 245

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- 2 Trades Union Congress (TUC)
- 3 Usdaw
- 4 Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)
- 5 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)
- 6 157 Group
- 7 Association of Colleges (AoC)
- 8 Protocol Skills
- 9 VT Education and Skills (VTE&S)
- 10 Crisis
- 11 Remploy Ltd
- 12 Skillfast-UK
- 13 City & Guilds
- 14 Edexcel
- 15 Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB)
- 16 OCR
- 17 English Regional Development Agencies
- 18 Professor Frank Coffield
- 19 EEF, The Manufacturers' Association
- 20 Electrical Contractors' Association (ECA)
- 21 Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) Ltd
- 22 National Audit Office (NAO)
- 23 Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
- 24 Accountancy Occupational Standards Group (AOSG)
- 25 The Age and Employment Network (TAEN) and Help the Aged
- 26 All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Business Services
- 27 Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- 28 BAE Systems

- 29 Business Services Association (BSA)
- 30 CBI
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- 32 Church of England
- 33 Edge Foundation
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- 36 Faber Maunsell
- 37 Financial Services Skills Council (FSSC)
- 38 Fitness Industry Association (FIA)
- 39 Barry Johnson, Learning Partners
- 40 KPMG
- 41 Mencap
- 42 Nacro
- 43 William Devine, Chief Executive Officer, National Forum of Engineering Centres (NFEC)
- 44 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
- 45 National Union of Teachers (NUT)
- 46 The Open University (OU)
- 47 Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)
- 48 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- 49 Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC)
- 50 Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities
- 51 Skills for Business Network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCS) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)
- 52 SkillsActive
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List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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Second Report	Citizenship Education	HC 147 (HC 517)
Third Report	Bullying	HC 85 (HC 600)
Fourth Report	The Bologna Process	HC 205 (HC 788)
Fifth Report	14–19 Diplomas	HC 249
Sixth Report	The Work of Ofsted	HC 165
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Eighth Report	The future sustainability of the higher education sector: international aspects	HC 285-I and II

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First Report	Schools White Paper: <i>Higher Standards, Better Schools For All</i>	HC 633-I and II (Cm 6747)
Second Report	Public Expenditure on Education and Skills	HC 479 (HC 1132)
Third Report	Special Educational Needs	HC 478-I, II and III (Cm 6940)
Fourth Report	Further Education	HC 649 (HC 1712)
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