

The role of brokers in skills, business support and welfare to work

Policy briefing outcomes note

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The Campaign for Learning's policy briefings respond quickly to the publication of key papers and leading policy issues and offer essential information and analysis to inform the work of policy makers. This paper summaries a recent policy seminar held on 10 May and which looked at 'The role of brokers in skills, business support and welfare to work.' It was based around four brief presentations looking at different perspectives of the brokerage system followed by round table discussion.

Introduction and Context

An interesting phenomena in recent times has been the growth of the intermediary – the agent, adviser or guide who works the space between those who provide education and training services and those who seek to use them. It's all part of trying to help people navigate what's often seen as a complex education and training system and secure a better fit between demand and supply.

One such group of intermediaries is the skills brokers, the independent contractors who provide advice, guidance and support to employers, especially those that are hard to reach, under the Train to Gain service. It's a challenging role. Brokers are expected to "diagnose business needs and source appropriate training provision." They have to be impartial but able to direct custom towards best fit providers and provision; they have to have a good general understanding of local business but advise on particular sector developments; and they have to help identify business needs and match them to appropriate qualification outcomes. Both Jack and 'Master' of all trades in effect.

On top of that, when the brokerage model was first announced under the 2005 Skills White Paper, it was not greeted with universal enthusiasm. 'Wielding too much influence,' 'getting in the way,' 'soaking up funds' were just some of the initial comments. The current Select Committee Inquiry into Skills has unearthed similar unease about the system. "It's not working" argued one witness, a college Principal; 'it's very difficult for a third party to have sufficient knowledge' argued a further witness, in this case a training consultant. It led Peter Kingston to pen an article in The Education Guardian a few weeks ago, questioning what the value of skills brokers really was.

However, recent evaluation, commissioned by the LSC, and covering the first four Train to Gain 'waves' last year, suggests that in some areas, employer skills brokerage can have an important role to play. According to the research what employers seem to be seeking in the first instance is specialist help, with assessment of training needs lower down their list of priorities. This can be seen in the ranking of expectations from employers. 'Brokers ability to identify potential funding to support training activities' and 'expertise and knowledge of the broker' are the top two expectations followed rapidly by 'brokers knowledge of training solutions within T2G,' 'brokers ability to translate company needs into an action plan' and 'brokers understanding of training and development needs.' Yet two of these, the ability of the broker to identify potential funding to support training activities and to translate the needs of the company into an action plan appear high up those aspects of the service reckoned to be in need of improvement.

To help understand the issues more clearly, the Campaign for Learning brought together four 'experts' to present their thoughts on skills brokerage. These included David Greer, Skills Director LSC, Judith Swift, unionlearn Development Manager, Michael Davis, Centre for Enterprise and Mick Fletcher, an independent consultant with particular interest in this area.

This paper summarises what each had to say and some of the discussion that followed.

An Overview by David Greer (LSC Skills Director – Support to Business)

David's presentation covered three aspects: an explanation of Train to Gain, an assessment on how it's going and what role brokers are playing in this, and finally a list of some of the challenges and issues that remain.

Train to Gain, as David reminded delegates, is a new service to help businesses get the training they need. It has two principle elements; an independent and impartial brokerage service and a provider service. The latter consists of training providers and colleges who have demonstrated through a procurement process that they can offer the sort of flexible and responsive training service that might have been identified through the brokerage service.

As to how effectively the brokerage system was working, it had not only reached but surpassed by 3000, its initial target of 'engaging' 33,000 employers. Not only that, 69% of those engaged were in the hard to reach category defined as such because they had not been involved in any training over the previous 12 months; again this beat the initial target of 51%. Employer demand had come from all sectors but particularly those in Health and Social Care (19%,) Wholesale and Retail (15%) and Manufacturing (12%.) Employer satisfaction remains high, 89% against such criteria as service quality, knowledge of the system and helpfulness of advice.

As to challenges and issues for the future, David identified five in particular:

- The relationship between the broker and the provider; this needs to be better in some places
- The quality of referrals which have not always been as clear as they might have been
- The range of expectations facing brokers; some providers, for instance, had expected brokers would be able to bring in shoals of business and have been disappointed when this has not happened. Yet brokers have been asked to focus primarily on hard to reach employers, these are by definition more difficult to bring in but are equally important
- Bureaucracy and restrictive practices; inevitable concerns in any new system such as Train to Gain
- The Leitch challenge of moving the brokerage system up a level so that it constitutes a fully joined up service

In the plenary that followed a number of issues were raised.

Q. How far does Skills for Life feature in this system?

A. This remains an essential part of Train to Gain although it's recognised that not as much activity as might be is going on in this area

Q. How important is the notion of 'firstness' as in first Level 2?

A. Acknowledged that the concept of a first level qualification is very important to Train to Gain but confirmed that the LSC was funding other forms of qualification as well. The challenge was to bring the various forms of learning together to support all learners

Q. Does the principle of full fat qualifications still apply?

A. Yes, though the hope is that the Qualifications and Credit Framework will herald a more flexible approach of qualifications, bite seized, credit rated and so on

Q. Does the LSC have any data on regional differences in uptake?

A. The LSC is collecting data on this but has not released it yet until clearer patterns and trends can be seen

Q. We've not had many referrals yet but do feel that the brokers are now being more open and starting to engage better with providers (This question from a provider rep)

A. Acknowledged that it's taken time in some areas for the brokerage system to run smoothly but was glad to hear that it was at least 'feeling better' now

A perspective from Judith Swift, unionlearn Development Manager

Judith confirmed that unions had been closely involved in the Employer Training Pilots and working closely to support Train to Gain. The TUC had no problem with demand led as a principle but wanted to ensure that the employee voice could be properly heard as part of that coalition of demand.

The role of unions so far had been to work closely with the LSC to see how far they could add value to the brokerage service. Judith provided some case study examples of where Train to Gain was beginning to build on to existing forms of learning and have an impact. To date, unionlearn was having quarterly meetings with the LSC to ensure channels of communication remained open, it had arranged local briefings, developed info packs and helped establish working protocols.

In terms of future issues and challenges, Judith equally identified five

- Ensuring Skills for Life is incorporated fully into Train to Gain
- Clarifying the position of ESOL, currently a politically sensitive issue
- Helping reach the 'hard to reach' learners
- Ensuring that the focus is not exclusively on Level 2 but can support other levels of learning as well
- Ensuring that Train to Gain can help as tool to support workforce development in its widest sense

Common standards and what can be achieved. A presentation by Michael Davis, Centre for Enterprise

Michael looked at two particular issues: the development national standards for brokers and the Leitch proposals for a 'super' brokerage system.

On the first, work has been under way to develop a common set of core competencies for brokers. The competencies will describe behaviours and particular skills needed to perform the role and will be an important step forward in ensuring the professionalism of the service. These standards are being progressively adopted and a national professional body, the Institute of Business Consultancy, being created.

On the second, Lord Leitch in his Skills Report had identified 17 different roles for brokers in the new skills architecture and had by and large jacked up the expectations of what brokerage could achieve. Michael's view was that two conclusions flowed from this. Firstly the need for a greater emphasis on the diagnostic role of brokers; in effect get the diagnosis right for customers and the training needs and improved business performance then follow. Secondly, it was important to get the branding of Train to

Gain right so that it wasn't just seen as a system offering 'freebies' but one that could offer high level quality business support.

Joining up the Brokers. Mick Fletcher, independent consultant

Mick argued that while Train to Gain could point to some success stories there remained some serious issues to resolve around the brokerage system.

Interestingly, the growth of brokerage seemed to be part of a wider phenomenon which Mick labelled 'the rise of brokerocracy' – the growth in intermediary agents, brokers and advisers. These now included amongst their number choice advisers for schools, Transition mentors, Connexions advisers, Next Step advisers, New Deal Advisers, now Train to Gain brokers and even possibly in the future Learning Account Brokers.

This development could be viewed as either a threat or an opportunity. A threat in that it could lead to increased silo working with lines of accountability that are not very clear; an opportunity in that they can provide learners with support at each stage of learning along with independent advice and support.

The fundamental question, however, is who are the brokers really working for? Are they working at the behest of learners, supporting them as far as possible with whatever they want? Or are they working at the behest of Government and in effect trying to 'shoehorn' learners into particular routes as in Level 2 and set qualifications as in just Government designed? Initial research seemed to indicate that brokers can operate at a variety of levels, with individuals in work and those not in work, with those who are qualified and those who are less qualified and so on. What was needed was a system of brokerage that could support learners at various stages of transition, that could bring together a range of training offers and could join up agency targets such as those between the LSC and Jobcentre Plus.

Further Information

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