

Culture of Learning

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 whole work of policy makers. This Paper summarises a recent seminar hosted by the Campaign looking at what Leitch described as 'a culture of learning.' The seminar was largely an open discussion forum in which more questions than answers were perhaps raised but this brief Paper summarises the main lines of discussion.

Introduction and context

In the introduction to his Final Report last December, Lord Leitch recognised a challenge that he had first raised in his Interim Report a year previously, namely that if we were really serious in tackling the skills challenge, we needed to engender a wider appreciation of the importance of learning. "Too many of us have little interest or appetite for improved skills. We must begin a new journey to embed a culture of learning. Employer and individual awareness must increase."

In introducing this topic for discussion, Sally Irwin from the team in DIUS charged with looking at this area of 'embedding a culture of learning,' reminded colleagues that achieving this was critical feature to meeting the Leitch ambitions. Yet that this was not something that would happen overnight or without considerable energy and some incentives. A culture implied a long process of development and nurturing.

The DIUS team had started by conducting a literature search on learning cultures trying to identify good practice, barriers and anything else that might help. This search had highlighted traditional barriers to learning such as cost, time and accessibility but also the complexity of the system and the perceived over emphasis on testing and measuring as opposed to learning and developing. These suggested that the issues about cultures of learning could not be located in any one sector of learning or any one age group. Leading research from NIACE and others had reinforced these perceptions.

For the present, the DIUS team had identified four strands in influencing the culture of learning and three questions that needed resolving. The four strands, which help develop a culture of learning, included:

- i. Skills Accounts
- ii. A universal careers and guidance service
- iii. Financial support
- iv. Marketing campaigns

And the three questions:

- i. What does a culture of learning look like and why aren't we there?
- ii. How can we change attitudes and behaviours to deliver the culture we want?
- iii. How can we tackle the issue of intergenerational disadvantage? Reaching those with low skill levels, supporting them to raise their aspirations and skill levels?

Discussion

For the rest of the seminar, discussion, ranged over these and other questions.

On question one, the following themes emerged:

- What exactly do we mean by a culture of learning? Something that is broad and open to all or something that is aligned with meeting the Leitch ambitions?

- What do we mean by learning? We learn all the time and particularly in our early years so are we just trying to get a fix on learning for a particular purpose or on learning in its widest sense? Often the latter acts as a greater stimulant to wanting to learn more
- Is it possible to develop a funding system that can support the development of a culture of learning, especially given its personalised and often eclectic nature?
- Do our systems, such as the funding, structure, performance measurement and so on make it easier or harder to develop a culture of learning? The view was that many of these system issues cut across the nature of a culture of learning
- Obvious, and tried mechanisms, include better information on what and where's available, better marketing and better guidance. Not all of these 'ducks' are lined up yet
- There does seem to be a hunger for learning in many workplaces, Union Learning Reps are finding this all the time and there are, as was indicated round the table, excellent examples of good practice out there
- Arguably a major driver in developing a culture of learning lies in the I bit of DIUS, Innovation. Where firms need to innovate they often experience skills gaps and this creates a drive for learning

On question two:

- Some uncertainty as to how far 'instruments' such as Train to Gain and Skills Accounts actually change behaviours. Behaviours often respond to other stimuli such as time off and financial incentives
- A further good way to change behaviours is through the use of intermediaries such as mentors, guides and peer groups. Apprenticeship Ambassadors are good examples of this
- A strong signal would be if DIUS rebalanced some of its funding priorities which currently favours the 'lucky' few going on to higher education at the expense of those going on to study else
- An obvious opportunity for a culture change arises with the World Skills in 2011, the Olympics in 2012 and the extending of the participation age to 17 in 2013. Such an opportunity needs to be maximised

On question three:

- Parental involvement, let alone parental background, can be key indicators
- Extended and community schooling provides a further opportunity to create accessible learning networks for both family and community learning