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Issue 4 · March 2011

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Adult Skills Policy Overview

Following the publication of its Skills for Sustainable Growth strategy document, it has now become clearer how the Adult Skills landscape has been affected by the change of government. That being the case, the million dollar question (or perhaps 'billion pound question' would be more apt) is... what has changed?



Beyond the budget cuts

With the budget deficit continuing to cast a long shadow across most areas of government spending, the Adult Skills sector is no exception, with a 25% reduction in the FE budget planned. Perhaps the most eye catching effect of budget cuts in this sector is the abolition of the Train to Gain programme, though other changes, such as the tightening of criteria for the funding of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) have also gained media attention.

However, beyond the budget cuts, there have also been significant changes to the underlying structure of Adult Skills policy. There are now 3 pillars which underpin policy for this sector; fairness (the first in line for help should be those unable to help themselves); responsibility (whilst government has a role to play, individuals and employers must also get involved); and freedom (removing government-centric targets and trusting people to do their job without them). Within each of these pillars, certain policies represent a continuation or development of the pre-existing approach, while others represent a marked change in direction.

Fairness

In so far as concerns 'fairness', there is a strong emphasis on targeting Skills funding at those with the lowest skills levels, and also on the 19-24 age group who have been most severely affected by the current economic climate. Those who are unemployed and on benefits will also be a focus. As such, Basic Skills training will continue to be fully funded for all adults, and 19-24 year olds will maintain

Case Study

The Skills for Life survey

TNS-BMRB are currently conducting the Skills for Life survey on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. This is a follow-up to the 2003 Skills for Life survey and aims to examine the change over time in adult literacy and numeracy skills. It will also be used to understand demographic, social and motivational factors around skills levels and, with the addition of a new ICT (Information & Communication Technologies) assessment, it will provide a baseline for assessing computer skills amongst the adult population.

The survey is carried out in consortium with AlphaPlus Consultancy Ltd, a highly experienced educational consultancy. The partnership brings together the expertise of TNS-BMRB in carrying out large, complex surveys, with the expertise of AlphaPlus Consultancy in developing skills assessment tools.

Following a development stage, designed to review the assessments employed in the 2003 survey as well as the broader demographic sections of the questionnaire, the main stage of interviewing began in the Spring

of 2010. The survey consists of a 70 minute interview amongst a nationally representative sample of 7,225 adults (aged 16-65) across England. As alluded to earlier, the questionnaire is unusual in that it includes an assessment of respondents' skills (in effect a mini-exam administered during the course of the interview) as well as the more 'traditional' demographic and attitudinal questions. As such, the project requires a specific skill set from interviewers working on it – a theme picked up in the later section titled 'Skills Assessments – A Very Different Type of Research'.

their entitlement to fully funded training for their first Level 2 or Level 3 qualification. Training entitlement for the unemployed will be linked to the specific skills barriers that are preventing individuals from gaining suitable employment. By targeting these specific groups, the government intends to increase social inclusion and promote social mobility whilst also providing business with a more highly skilled workforce.

Following the theme of social mobility and inclusion, there is a renewed emphasis on apprenticeships – in part a response to the fact that vocational routes to work are more widespread amongst those from lower socio-economic groups. Indeed, spending on apprenticeships has been earmarked for an increase of up to £250 million over the Spending Review period, equating to an extra 50,000 apprenticeship places each year, rising to 75,000 in 2014-15. As well as increasing the number of places available, a new emphasis will be placed on higher level (Level 3) apprenticeships, which will provide the more technical skills necessary for the UK to remain on a competitive footing internationally.

For those falling outside the scope of fully funded skills training, FE student loans are being introduced and it will be interesting to see what impact these will have on the demographic profile of those taking up learning opportunities.

Responsibility

In terms of responsibility, there is an expectation that business will take a greater role in Adult Skills, both in terms of funding and delivery. In particular, it seems that there is an emphasis on training to be delivered within the workplaces of Small and Medium enterprises and government funding of £100 million will be put in place to support this. Furthermore, the government will increasingly be looking for input from business regarding the content of new professional standards, with the goal of boosting skills in a way which can help directly to drive the competitiveness of UK based companies.

Such changes will, of course, have a significant impact on FE colleges, which are potentially facing the need to reduce staff headcount whilst simultaneously refocusing their offering to match the new requirements, for example by placing a greater emphasis on apprenticeships. Flexibility and innovation will be vital attributes in the years to come, though the loosening of controls described later should serve to ease this process somewhat.

Case Study

The International Survey of Adult Skills

Last year TNS-BMRB was commissioned to carry out a ground-breaking piece of research in consortium with NFER, NatCen and NISRA; the International Survey of Adult Skills. This survey is the most comprehensive international survey of adult skills ever undertaken and is a collaboration between the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the governments of the 27 different countries that are involved. Within the UK the project is overseen by BIS and DfE.

The survey is designed to enable a robust comparison of adult competencies between countries, and to identify the impact of economic and societal factors on competencies (and vice versa). As such, there is a

strong focus on ensuring that research processes in each country are brought closely in line with each other, thus making the results comparable internationally. One striking example of this requirement for uniformity is that bespoke interviewing software has been developed for the project and is used in all countries, ensuring that respondents are exposed to the same interviewing experience, regardless of where they may live. This is particularly important as the interview includes self-completion assessment sections with a strong visual element.

Similar attention to detail has applied across the entire project, from interviewer training through to data provision, with constant co-operation with our international colleagues.

Freedom

Finally we come to the ‘freedom’ principal, where a shift in approach to target setting signals a more fundamental shift in policy. Amongst the key driving forces behind the previous government’s Adult Skills strategy were Lord Moser’s ‘A Fresh Start: Improving literacy and numeracy’ report of 1999 and the Leitch Report of 2006, both of which served to highlight the lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills amongst a significant proportion of the UK population. The Skills for Life strategy for boosting literacy and numeracy was informed by Lord Moser’s report and continues to be a key element of the current government’s adult skills strategy. However, whilst endorsing the Leitch report’s ambition of developing a skills base that will enable the UK to remain competitive in an increasingly challenging global marketplace, the government is abolishing the specific targets that had previously been set (to ensure that 95% of UK adults have entry level 3 numeracy skills and that 95% of adults have level 1 literacy skills by 2020). Rather than setting centralised targets, the government is instead keen to allow local organisations, with knowledge of the specific needs of their communities, to have a greater say in the way they run their Adult Skills provision.

This removal of centralised control is a central theme of the new skills policies, which include a simplification of funding processes, a reduction in general

administrative burden and a greater focus on autonomy for providers. However, with freedom comes responsibility and any providers failing to meet minimum standards of performance face the prospect of having their funding removed.

Managing change

The preceding points only begin to scratch the surface of what is going on in the Adult Skills sector in this time of flux. Over the months to come, the finer points of policy will undoubtedly continue to be informed by the mixture of art and science that has traditionally underpinned decision making. What is certain in these uncertain times is that new policies will demand new research approaches to assess them effectively and TNS-BMRB will, as always, be there to help provide the answers to questions as yet unknown.



Skills Assessments – A Very Different Type of Research

Getting People Involved

Interviews which incorporate skills assessments present a number of additional challenges when compared to the more traditional face to face interview. For example, a key challenge of skills surveys is that they can, intrinsically, be alienating to some of the groups that it is most important to include – it is essential that people of all skills levels take part in order to avoid distorting results.

The interviewer plays a crucial role in this, both when introducing the survey on the doorstep and whilst carrying it out in the respondent's home. Interviewers must be sensitive to the widely differing needs of respondents, for example by creating a supportive and un-judgemental interviewing environment for those who may not be very confident about their skills. At the other end of the scale, those who are very highly educated may be encouraged to participate by emphasising the varied and interesting nature of the interview. Language may present a further challenge, as assessments are typically designed to assess **English** language skills and sensitivity is therefore essential for the field force.

Incentives are another important piece of the jigsaw puzzle when it comes to encouraging participation in such studies and our experiments in projects such as The International Survey of Adult Skills (see earlier Case Study) have demonstrated the marked difference that varying levels of incentivisation can yield.

Keeping Them Interested

Another layer of complexity stems from the fact that interviews involving skills assessments are generally longer than standard face to face interviews. Careful attention is paid to this in the design of the survey, to ensure that it is as engaging as possible for the respondent. However, our interviewers also play a key role here, by helping respondents to engage with the survey no matter what their skill level, encouraging them to continue even if they find a certain section of questions challenging. Despite the long interview lengths, we find that very few respondents drop out of our skills interviews prior to completion.

One of the key design elements which can help to maintain respondent engagement is to ensure that any assessment sections in the script are underpinned by adaptive algorithms. Such an approach means that the respondent is never faced with long sections of questions that are inappropriate to their abilities. This helps to avoid two fundamental problems – a respondent faced with a long series of questions that they consider too easy is likely to lose focus or stop answering carefully, while a respondent faced with a barrage of questions they can't answer is likely to become dispirited and may break off the interview.

Ensuring the Interview Runs Smoothly

Skills assessments can also pose a challenge from a technical point of view. Due to the unusual nature of assessment questions, they are typically programmed outside the standard interviewing software environment and therefore need software development work to incorporate them seamlessly into the main body of the interview. Stability is a key issue, as bespoke software can be more prone to crash than established software packages and we have significant experience of the testing processes necessary to avoid unwelcome situations where a respondent may have spent an hour completing a survey, only for the software to corrupt their data.

We should perhaps finish by stressing the fact that in spite of (or perhaps because of) all the challenges involved in running skills surveys, they are fascinating projects to work on.

If you have any questions about anything you've read – or indeed want to discuss some other aspect of skills assessment – then please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Case Study

The National Survey of Adult Skills in Wales

Alongside the Skills for Life survey, TNS-BMRB has also run The National Survey of Adult Skills in Wales, a survey covering similar topics, but with the additional challenge of conducting interviews in both English and Welsh.

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