

Paper for Education and Lifelong Learning Committee 16 March 2006

Skills for Business network: Contribution to the ELWa Work-Based Learning Improvement Plan

The Skills for Business Network (Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency) covers 80% of the UK workforce, and the SSDA works with SSCs and other sector bodies to provide coverage of occupations and sectors outside the network. The SSCs are employer-led UK wide bodies which have an active presence in Wales. The Skills for Business network welcomes the initiatives in this plan to improve the quality, relevance and success of work-based programmes.

This paper sets out some of the key ways in which the Skills for Business Network can potentially work with employers and key partners in Wales to support and deliver the Work-Based Learning Improvement Plan. Our role in some of the key recommendations is highlighted below.

Recommendation 2. Embed the Apprenticeship Blueprint.

SSCs and sector bodies are implementing the Blueprint when they review their frameworks with their employers, and key partners. The Blueprint was introduced in September 2005 and frameworks are licensed for 3 years. As part of their core activity, and alongside their Sector Skills Agreements, SSCs are working with the Blueprint as they develop new frameworks. This is an on-going activity for SSCs. One example, is the full scale reform of frameworks carried out by Automotive Skills because they recognised that their frameworks were not addressing employment needs effectively. This review made sure that frameworks were clear about the purpose of the programmes and what they should be designed to achieve. Sector bodies outside the network with responsibility for framework design are allocated resources for coverage of this essential activity.

In December 2005, the Learning and Skills Council transferred its role in approving frameworks to the Skills for Business network. Its Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG) includes representatives of six SSCs and sector bodies, ELWa/Welsh Assembly Government and LSC. It meets bi-monthly, and reviews frameworks submitted by SSCs and sector bodies to ensure that the requirements of the Blueprint are addressed through the framework. The procedures for submitting frameworks and the guidance have been streamlined and simplified.

Each SSC and most sector bodies have apprenticeship managers who develop and design frameworks. The SSDA has set up an apprenticeship managers group, which exchanges good practice, and addresses training needs, focusing on the interpretation of the Blueprint for Wales and England, and streamlining the approvals process. In the course of applying the Blueprint, SSCs might identify additional areas

where greater flexibility is needed. Where this happens, these areas will be monitored and the SSDA will work with the Welsh Assembly Government to propose solutions. There is no evidence base yet suggesting that the frameworks based on the new Blueprint are not meeting employment needs – but it is too early to judge.

Recommendation 3. Explore innovative approaches to increase employer engagement.

As SSCs take forward their work on Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), they will clarify current and future skills needs, and analyse how effectively current provision, including frameworks, addresses those needs. The innovative approaches necessary will vary with sectors. Robust sector intelligence from SSAs drawn up by SSCs in consultation with their employers will be vital to inform this agenda. The successful credit projects, led by ELWa in conjunction with awarding bodies, illustrate the opportunity the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales gives for recognition of work-based learning. In some sectors, (for example, Skills for Health), it would be timely to look at possible pilot approaches in which credit is applied to assessed units of training, and rules of combination are developed for the units to secure effective occupational competence. In some sectors, particularly where NVQs have an image problem, this would be a useful alternative. However, other SSCs (for example, Automotive Skills) would caution against removing NVQs, because they support work-based learning, and suggest that the focus should be on improving quality of delivery.

Recommendation 4. Investigate options for improving the delivery chain.

In England, SSCs are working with their employers to develop Skills Academies to support the delivery of skills for their sectors. As SSAs are developed the Welsh Assembly Government will consider carefully the solutions proposed for Wales by each sector, including Skills Academies where appropriate. Where it does not lead to bureaucracy and duplication, some SSCs are working to improve quality through endorsement schemes. There are also SSCs with their own quality improvement strategies for their sectors. These include providing guidance and collecting and disseminating good practice.

It might be worth looking at whether the inspection framework applied to the delivery chain adequately addresses the significant variation between and across sectors. The Skills for Business network would be willing to explore this with Estyn.

Recommendation 5. More flexible use of WBL budget within the workforce development programme to deliver part-subsidised, flexible training for adults in employment.

As the report highlights, the reasons for non-completion are variable and complex and differ in sectors. Two SSCs (Lantra and Skillsmart Retail) present very different perspectives on this. Lantra has issues

about learners taught in Welsh and tested in English. This can create problems where the Welsh learner is less confident in written English. Skillsmart Retail has identified issues relating to low entry level skills, and lack of motivation, particularly where there are external tests. Industry factors such as staff turnover levels also have an impact.

The appropriateness of the recommendation will probably vary with sectors. SSCs where there is a high level of adult participation in frameworks, and the weakest levels of completion, would be willing to explore this issue and build on existing work to boost achievement rates in particular sectors.

In considering further work, it would be necessary to consider the purpose of Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships, and their brand image. Some SSCs would urge caution and suggest that company training schemes should not be confused with frameworks which represent a nationally recognized, industry-agreed, assessed standard of occupational competence. Linked to this would be the possibility that too many variations to the framework have a negative impact on the confidence of employers who champion frameworks, if they do not give work-based learners the range of skills, knowledge and understanding for competence at work.

Recommendation 6. A probationary period with sector-specific pre-entry assessment/testing.

The Skills for Business Network supports and welcomes improved guidance to potential Foundation and Modern Apprentices. There is a real problem with the quality of information, advice and guidance. Teachers and careers advisers tend not to promote work-based learning routes and young people are not able to make informed decisions about what options are open to them.

There already are entry criteria in place for some sectors. The approach adopted needs to be agreed in consultation with individual SSCs, as there are difference practices in some sectors. For example, although the joint Health and Social Care framework does not have entry criteria, the framework does list desirable qualities and other essential checks. These would continue to be necessary.

Recommendation 8. Targeted information and marketing to individuals and employers.

SSCs work with employers to promote frameworks, but recognise the benefits of additional promotional activity. It is important that SSCs work closely with the Welsh Assembly Government to maximise the benefits of marketing activity.

In addition, some SSCs have developed registration schemes so that they can track apprentices and provide services to support their on-going relationship and career development in the sector. All SSCs provide certification to learners.

SSCs would be interested in working with the Welsh Assembly Government on a possible award scheme for employers.

Recommendation 11. Work with HEFCW, HEFCE and WAG to create new progression routes into higher education.

A number of SSCs are participating in a DfES-led project which is applying UCAS tariff points to frameworks. Skills for Health is particularly positive about this approach – and would welcome the opportunity to broaden this work.