
Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund Year 4

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Introduction

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) was announced in 'The Learning Age' Consultation Paper published in February 1998. The Fund helps to promote innovative activity by trade unions to support the creation of a learning society. In the 2000 Spending Review, ULF was allocated funds to continue the work until 2004, with £7 million allocated for 2001-02, including £1 million for basic skills work.

In addition to gathering and commenting on the performance of projects, this year's evaluation has begun to address how impact could be assessed for employers.

Key Findings

- The scale of ULF activity increased in the 4th year, with 121 projects (100 new and 21 continuation projects) funded to a total of £6.9 million;
- Of the 107 Year 4 projects surveyed, there was a reported leverage of an additional 3.23m of external funds to support and sustain ULF activities;
- The reported key outputs across all four years of ULF were:
 - Approximately 28,000 people have taken part in learning (13,000 in Year 4)
 - Approximately 4,500 learning representatives have been trained (1,500 in Year 4)
 - Approximately 560 accredited courses developed (400 in Year 4)
- The employers surveyed (94) in Year 4, wanted to be involved in union led learning supported through ULF to try and foster relationships with workers and the unions and to gain workforces that are more willing to participate in learning / training. 96% of the employers were interested and committed to remaining involved in ULF;
- The researchers outlined the feasibility of assessing economic impact of ULF on employers and businesses and concluded there were significant difficulties associated with this;
- Current arrangements for measuring and reporting developments in capacity are inadequate. The lack of consistency in reporting has had implications for collecting information on performance measures and assessing impact.

Other Findings

Year 4 Projects - Profile

Of the 121 projects supported by ULF in Year 4, some started late in the financial year, so 107 were available to this evaluation. As many of these had only recently started, 66 projects provided the information on which the analysis of outputs is based. The 121 projects were run by 39 trade unions and the TUC and secured £6.9 million of ULF funds. Some 13% of the Year 4 projects continued activities from Year 3 or earlier. 8 unions ran 5 or more projects each.

The most common activities in Year 4 were the development of learning representatives (22% of projects), ILAs (by 14%) and basic skills (17%). Access and equality were also key themes (12%). Just over 25% of projects were defined as 'national'. There were 7 projects in the South West, 10 in the East Midlands and 10 in Yorkshire and Humberside. The North West had one less project than last year (with 16), and a more balanced geographic spread of projects appears to have been achieved. Around a third of ULF projects are multi-site, with an average of 5 sites per project.

In Year 4, funding was available over 2 years until March 2003. The average ULF funding per project was just over £57,000, but the amount levered in is significantly higher than in Year 3, with an increase in both the proportion of projects leveraging in other funding (40%) and in the average amount levered (£71,000).

Outputs and Targets

The standard set of indicators covers the broad range of activities undertaken by ULF projects. The analysis only covers outputs achieved up to the end of January 2002 - given that many projects had not started and that many will operate to March 2003, it is likely that the timing of the report leads to understating of the overall outputs that will be achieved in Year 4.

In Year 4, the following targets have been exceeded: the number of learners achieving qualifications (actual 5,550 against a target of 4,303); the number of learning centres established or developed (66 against 48) and the number of ILAs (5,485 against 3,510). Targets such as 'the numbers of training needs analyses undertaken' and 'the numbers of individuals attending briefings/awareness sessions' were so far in

excess of indicated targets that they must be treated with caution. For the targets 'the number of employers involved' and 'learners starting courses' the shortfall was considerable and it is unlikely that they will be achieved. This suggests that improvement in management and monitoring techniques, setting of realistic targets or planning in delivery schedules to meet deadlines is needed.

Analysis of cost per output achieved demonstrates a fall in cost per unit, particularly in relation to learners enrolling and achieving qualifications. This pattern suggests that unions are building on the groundwork of earlier projects and are using the expertise and access to other resources they have gained. However, during follow up phone calls with project managers it became apparent that there is inconsistency in their understanding of what is to be recorded for some measures.

Barriers

Over 30% of projects feel that they have encountered a lack of support from employers - as 2 project managers noted:

"it is very hard to get much enthusiasm or activity from smallish private sector companies. They say they cannot afford to release people ... and don't believe that setting up a long term strategy will be of benefit."

"while support from some employers has been extremely positive, the majority are still not convinced of the benefits which learning brings"

Securing release continues to be an issue, indicating the need for continued promotion of the business benefits of learning representatives to employers. The other main barriers faced have been: suspension of ILAs; difficulties in recruiting project managers and their being spread too thinly; and difficulties in arranging/getting access to courses.

ILAs were withdrawn in autumn 2001: the impact of suspension appears to have been on learners as opposed to the ULF projects, although it did impact on projects that included the delivery of learning.

Employer Impact Survey

DfES set a target to complete 300 telephone interviews with employers based on reports from year 2 and 3 project surveys of 1,700 employers being involved in ULF projects. The response rate was

disappointing with 94 employers interviewed. A variety of possible reasons were identified to explain the low response rate, including the incomplete records kept on employers both by ULF projects and the Department and the number of employers involved in the projects where input never went beyond writing letters of support for bids, resulting in an overestimation of employers actively involved.

Employer involvement in learning activity

The 94 respondents (of which 39% have been involved in ULF for 2 years or more) described the main types of learning activity they had been involved in as: basic skills (33%); learning representatives (17%); computer literacy (10%); basic IT (10%); and learning centres (10%).

The main reasons given for being involved in ULF projects were: to have a more confident/enthusiastic workforce (26%); to have a workforce that is more receptive to training (21%); to improve workforce skills (18%); to improve workforce IT skills (15%); and to have a workforce with more of the skills necessary for promotion (15%).

This sample of employers was willing to be involved with ULF to try and foster relationships with unions and the workers. Where 'harder' gains were mentioned, it was only by a few contributors, for example issues such as productivity were not ranked highly.

Employer benefits

Employers were asked how they felt that they benefit from their involvement in ULF projects. The responses focus mainly on softer aspects such as confidence of staff, improved relations and communications.

When asked about the methods used to assess these benefits, the main approaches appear to be subjective and personal in nature: observation and conversation. This does not mean that the benefits have not been real; rather that there is little consistent 'scientific' approach to measuring benefits.

Sustainability

Most employers (73%) feel that activities are likely to continue. The response was even stronger amongst those involved over a longer period and amongst public sector employers. The level of interest and commitment to remaining involved is very high, with

96% feeling strongly that they would like to continue to be involved.

Employers were asked to comment on the basis of giving release (without distinguishing between paid and unpaid), stressing that it was release from working time. 84% did not see the issue of release as a barrier.

Additionality

When asked to comment on the extent to which they felt that the activities they had been involved in would not have taken place without the funding from ULF, 62% felt that ULF funding had been important in generating the activity - with this proportion rising to 67% among those employers still involved.

Encouraging employer participation

Employers were asked to describe what they felt were the 'best and worst things' resulting from their involvement. The overall view was that ULF had been a positive and beneficial activity for them, with the 'best things' focusing on awareness, team building, confidence and building industrial relations. The amount of time required/lost through participation was mentioned by 13% of respondents but over half felt that there was nothing negative.

Employers were keen to encourage other employers to get involved, with over 50% suggesting that more marketing and promotion of the benefits of involvement in the Fund should be undertaken.

Assessing Economic Impact - Feasibility

The researchers outlined the feasibility of assessing economic impact of ULF on employers and businesses and concluded there were significant difficulties associated with this. Alternative measures might be regarded as intermediate impacts which could be defined as necessary, though not sufficient, to achieve the wider measure: these include company performance (profitability, productivity and competitiveness); attitudes to learning; communications (staff morale, staff turnover and attendance); core skills (numeracy, literacy and IT).

Through a series of employer consultations we aimed to establish whether these measures were legitimate (i.e. could ULF be a contributing factor), and if so, whether the employers had observed them and had any recording systems in place. There was a consensus that the measures were reasonable for ULF

outcomes, although for some of the company performance measures it would be difficult to trace causality.

Conclusions

The purpose of the Fund remains valid: trade unions have shown that they can make a contribution to engaging and supporting individuals in lifelong learning. In ULF Year 4, there has been an increase in volumes overall and by project, and there continues to be a wide range of activities including improving access and relevance of learning offered.

The crude indicators of unit cost used have shown increased efficiency. In that sense, it is likely that value for money is also improving. However, quantitative measures on their own may not be sufficient or representative. Future activity may be better measured through 'distance travelled' by individuals and changes in attitudes as well as in participation rates.

Unions are, in general, exceeding performance targets set in projects and have become much more able to access additional resources to maintain and enhance core ULF activities. Reporting of activities such as numbers of learners engaged and training needs analyses carried out have become less reliable as a measure. As the emphasis shifts increasingly to embedding and roll-out of activity, other measures will be required to reflect what the union contribution has been.

The survey of employers established that they valued their involvement with ULF activities and that they had observed benefits. Employers have also increased their contribution to the overall resources going into projects. However, project workers appear to be confused about the nature of employer involvement - if this is to be a key measure of success, it is vital that the expected nature of involvement is understood and recorded. Similarly, it is important that expectations of employer benefits from involvement are clear. Our feasibility study on economic impacts for employers shows that this would be a difficult and perhaps unreliable exercise.

Recommendations

DfES should review the nature of employer involvement and how projects are expected to report such involvement;

DfES should review the requirements of bidding

documents and prospectus to require explicit and measurable performance targets in bids;

The range of output indicators should be reviewed to reflect expectations of performance, measures of success and themes in the Fund;

The requirements and processes for collection of management information need to be clarified to simplify the process of collection and ensure consistency;

DfES administrators should ensure that required reporting information is submitted by projects;

The promotional strategy for ULF to employers should be reviewed and should include raising awareness of benefits of the ULF programme and access through partnerships with unions;

If there is a policy wish to link ULF to economic outcomes as defined by company performance, there is a need to focus ULF projects more clearly on particular, identifiable and measurable company activities;

As trade unions develop their role as learning intermediaries, ULF managers should determine measures that reflect the functions of affecting the supply of learners and the provision of learning, for example to report changes in attitude as well as activity.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR378) - price £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Anneasley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Prices Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB378) are available free of charge from the above address (tel:0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

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