

Understanding the Contribution of the Third Sector in Learning and Skills

Summary report

September 2009

Further information

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IFF Research

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Research Report: Understanding the Contribution of the Third Sector in Learning and Skills

Prepared for Learning and Skills Council by IFF Research Ltd

September 2009

Executive summary

Background and methodology

This report has been commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to gain a detailed understanding of the scale and nature of the learning provision supplied by third sector learning providers in England and the impact of this provision on learners.

Third sector providers play an important role in bringing disadvantaged adults and young people into learning and skills development. This report brings together quantitative data on third sector¹ learner demographics and performance, alongside qualitative insights into how the third sector engages and supports its learners.

Meeting these objectives required two phases of research, comprising:

- A comprehensive analysis of existing quantitative data recorded on the LSC's Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database, covering four academic years from 2004/05 to 2007/08; and
- A series of qualitative case studies of priority learning areas², involving 54 in-depth interviews with third sector learners and 12 interviews with third sector providers.

The third sector provision referred to in this report relates only to direct provision, and not provision that is subcontracted- or franchised-out, to the third sector.

Key findings

Profile of learners and learning aims

Analysis of ILR data shows that within the three funding streams explored (Further Education [FE], Work-Based learning [WBL] and European Social Fund [ESF]), third sector provision reaches a distinct learner demographic compared with non-third sector provision.

Within every funding stream, third sector learners are more likely to have a learning difficulty or disability, and in WBL and ESF provision, they are more ethnically diverse and also more likely to be resident in a deprived area³.

Almost half (45%) of WBL third sector learners live in the bottom 20% of the most deprived areas, compared with 28% of non-third sector WBL learners.

Third sector FE provision also attracts older learners compared with non-third sector FE: just 2% of learners are aged 16–18 vs. 30% of those learners on an FE course with a non-third sector provider.

¹The Third Sector comprises organisations which are non-governmental and value- rather than profit-driven, reinvesting surpluses to further their social, cultural or environmental goals. It was previously known as the voluntary and community sector. (HM Treasury, 2005: *Exploring the role of the third sector in public service delivery and reform*).

²The priority learning areas that the case study research focussed on were: Work-based learning (WBL) undertaken by learners with a learning difficulty and/or disability; European Social Fund (ESF) learning undertaken by 16–18-year-old learners; ESF learning undertaken by adult learners; Further Education (FE) learners participating in Full Level 2 learning; and WBL undertaken by young learners on Apprenticeships resident in particularly deprived areas. These areas were informed by exploration of the ILR data and were agreed in consultation with the LSC's Third Sector team.

³As defined according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

www.communities.gov.uk/communities/neighbourhoodrenewal/deprivation/deprivation07

As well as showing demographic differences, third sector learners engage with learning and skills from different backgrounds and less 'traditional' routes. In 2007/08, around two-thirds of WBL third sector learners (67%) were unemployed when they started their course vs. just 12% of learners in non-third sector WBL. Here the third sector has a significant role to play in delivering Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes; over 19,000 E2E programmes were provided in 2007/08, representing just over one-quarter of all the total E2E aims delivered nationally.

Achievement rates

The achievement rates for third sector learners vary by funding stream and also by learner demographics.

Achievement rates⁴ for third sector FE learning aims are significantly higher than those for non-third sector FE learning aims (88% vs. 75%). Furthermore, third sector FE achievement rates have increased significantly since 2004/05 (from 78% to 88% – an increase of 10 percentage points).

In WBL and ESF provision, third sector achievement rates among young learners (16–18 years) are comparable with non-third sector provision. However, among adult learners (19+ years) on both funding streams, achievement rates are slightly lower than those found outside of the third sector.

The lower achievement rates secured by adult learners on WBL and ESF courses in the third sector compared with non-third sector provision is likely to be, at least in part, a result of the third sector tending to work with individuals who are more likely to have multiple disadvantages and additional learning or social needs, particularly in the case of those studying Level 1 and Entry Level courses (where achievement rates tend to be the lowest).

That said, third sector WBL providers were more successful at securing achievement among adult learners on *Skills for Life* aims than non-third sector providers (77% of adult third sector learners achieved their *Skills for Life* aims in 2007/08 compared with 64% of non-third sector adult learners).

Across all ages and funding streams third sector providers performed better than their non-third sector counterparts, in terms of achievement rates for learners with a learning difficulty and/or disability.

Engaging and supporting learners

Evidence from the qualitative case study research suggests that third sector providers invest considerable time and effort into the recruitment, initial guidance and needs-assessment of their prospective students. Third sector providers tend to take a holistic, rather than a funding-led, approach to learning delivery, with learners offered not just their funded course but also commonly mentoring, one-to-one tutoring and guidance, personal support and job-searching advice. Consequently, third sector learners can extract maximum benefit from their learning.

Third sector providers have strong relationships with other organisations, in both the public and voluntary sectors, and draw on these relationships to engage learners and offer additional support. Many of their learners are referred by Connexions Direct (in the case of young learners) or by Jobcentre Plus (for adults), and work in partnership with these organisations, local schools, social services, youth groups, young offenders' programmes and other organisations to meet learners' needs more holistically.

Providers offer pastoral and financial advice in-house, where possible, but refer learners to specialist organisations in more complex cases.

⁴Calculated as the number of achieved and partially achieved aims, expressed as a percentage of the number of aims with a definite outcome (i.e. excluding any aims where learning is still ongoing).

The personalised, flexible approach of third sector providers is central to their success with harder-to-reach learners. Advisors or teaching staff help students choose the most suitable courses for that individual and extra Key Skills or preliminary courses can be added, as needed. Much resource is put into monitoring learners and working with them to 'overcome' the barriers that they encounter. Students are often able to complete a course 'in their own time', rather than having to adhere to strict or 'traditional' timetables.

Previously 'disaffected' learners describe feeling able to engage with third sector provision due to the approachable staff and the one-to-one help that they receive with both learning and personal issues, right from the outset. In smaller classes and an environment that is 'not like school', many of these students discover a new motivation to learn and find work. Overall, learner satisfaction with third sector courses is extremely high.

Successful work placements are key drivers of learning satisfaction and completion. Some third sector providers have established in-house, simulated, workplace environments or social enterprises that are very effective for those learners who are furthest from the labour market. However, in organisations that rely on local employers to provide work experience, some learners report not getting a placement or not feeling their placement was relevant. The economic downturn has made arranging work placements more difficult for WBL providers.

As well as 'hard' outcomes (for example, qualifications, further learning and/or employment) being achieved by many learners interviewed as part of the case study research, a wide range of 'softer' outcomes were reported (for example, increased confidence and motivation, an improved attitude to learning and improved employability skills).

Conclusions and recommendations

Personal and social circumstances of the third sector learner population, such as learning difficulties and/or disabilities, social deprivation, precarious housing or unstable family backgrounds, make the starting point for many third sector providers more difficult compared with that of non-third sector learning provision.

The research suggests that the key factor differentiating providers with very high achievement rates from those with average achievement rates is the type of learner targeted and attracted. Typically, providers with very high achievement rates work with less disadvantaged learners, who are less 'disenfranchised' from learning. As such, a single, overall measure of achievement by the provider may mask the significant 'added value' of those providers working predominantly with more disadvantaged groups.

Key recommendations arising from the research include:

Information – more regular and more transparent communication

- Ongoing information and communication between the LSC and its third sector partners is vital. Providers need to be informed, well in advance, of any changes to their contracts, administrative requirements, specific funding rules and eligibility criteria, or new policy priorities within the learning and skills sector, in general.

Flexibility and long-term commitment – recognising the needs of third sector providers and their learners

- Third sector providers feel that the needs of their learners could be met more effectively by increasing the flexibility of funding streams and eligibility criteria or by allowing providers more discretion in the administration of a limited amount of budget for learning delivery and support. This would reflect the manner in which many providers work with learners; tailoring the level and nature of the support needed to the individual and providing intensive one-to-one interventions, when needed.

- We recommend that consideration is given to calculating the contribution of the third sector to the LSC's aims and objectives by introducing a 'value-added' or 'distance-travelled' performance metric, in addition to the current achievement rates that are calculated for providers. This approach would assess the relative improvement a learner makes, considering his or her prior educational attainment, any barriers to their learning and enabling a complete assessment of their progress. This is a complex task, and current ILR records do not allow this type of reliable measure, given that much of the information relating to prior educational achievement and learning outcomes is incomplete. Working with the third sector to improve data collection in this area may 'pave the way' for robust analysis.
- Providers would benefit from more long-term and integrated, priority commitments and from funding being 'ring-fenced' for particular disadvantaged groups to ensure 'continuity' in the provision that can be offered. This is perhaps even more important in the recession, where the third sector has a strong record of working with the long-term unemployed and those with low, prior educational achievement to re-skill or up-skill and to promote employability and confidence. Longer-term contracts are vital for providers, so that funding will not suddenly be removed, enabling them to engage in more effective future planning.
- Looking forward, the role of the third sector in working with priority groups (for example, the unemployed, those with a learning difficulty and/or disability and learners resident in deprived areas) could be consolidated and fully utilised in the equality and diversity strategies, and the recession/unemployment strategies, of the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

Resources – more funding to cover the resource implications of recruiting and supporting disadvantaged learners

- Providers often struggle to mobilise enough resources to finance their activities. Thus, there is a repeated call to make more funds available to help resource the extra effort that is required to safeguard the continuity of a holistic, learning delivery and learner support programme within the third sector. Across the different funding streams (FE, WBL, ESF) there is an increased need for funding arising from a learner population that is more disadvantaged and faces more barriers to learning than the non-third sector learner population. Building on the disadvantage, 'uplift' element of the current funding model to provide additional funds for those learners likely to require significant additional support would benefit the third sector and provide an incentive for all providers to engage with particular learning groups.
- Adult learners within WBL and ESF are currently less likely to achieve their aims than their non-third sector counterparts. Additional resource for WBL and ESF adult learners may help; within the third sector these learners tend to be those with the greatest additional (whether learning or non-learning) needs.
- Providers were concerned that funding may, in the future, increasingly follow achievement rates. There is a perception that this would financially favour colleges and would discourage providers from 'reaching out' to those learners who are more difficult to assist (or make it financially impossible to do so). As discussed above, 'softer' outcomes (for example, increased employability skills, confidence or improved attitude to learning) are often important outcomes for both third sector providers and learners. Overall measures of achievement often mask the significant progress that many learners make with third sector providers.
- WBL provision, in particular, has found it harder to adjust to the recession, as learners struggle to get the jobs that are a prerequisite of this type of training. As well as additional resources,

some third sector WBL providers may benefit from LSC support in developing stronger links with local employers to provide guaranteed and relevant work placements to learners.

- Rural providers face additional costs from working in more remote locations, with learners having greater needs in terms of provider-supported transport and childcare, and suitable venues for training being considerably harder to find. Funding organised on a session-by-session basis is felt not to acknowledge these extra costs. Instead, providers require additional funding for working in geographically isolated areas, covering the infrastructural costs that need to be met prior to learning or training occurring.

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© LSC January 2008
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LSC-P-NAT-090182