



Skilling the Unskilled: access to work-based learning and the lifelong learning agenda

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ABSTRACT *European and national policy debates are emphasising the need to establish a culture of lifelong learning in order to promote workers' adaptability and employability. The emphasis on the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own learning fails to address patterns of inequality in access to work-based learning. Unskilled workers are least likely to receive formal training in the workplace and they are often those whose experience of formal schooling has been poor and are unlikely to access learning outside the workplace on their own initiative. The article has a dual focus: on the nature of work which is considered to have a low skill content and on the individuals who occupy these positions in the organisation of production because of their low level of educational qualification and/or their status as subordinate members of society. The extent to which access to learning is seen as linked to problems faced by the individual or the context of the work environment has consequences for the ways in which patterns of inequality in access are reproduced or can be challenged. It examines contemporary changes in the nature of unskilled work and its consequences for managers' and trade unions' training strategies. This forms the background for an assessment of the likely impact of the Labour government's policy on learning opportunities for adults in the workplace, based on a reading of the report of the National Advisory Committee for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (Fryer, 1997) and the Green Paper 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain' (DfEE, 1998).*

Introduction

At a time when both European and national policy debates are stressing the need for all individuals to engage in lifelong learning, it seems appropriate to question how this will affect unskilled workers, who constitute the categories of employee with the lowest levels of formal education and the least access to work-related training (Evans *et al.*, 1997). The concept of lifelong learning is based on the need for the individual to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Lifelong learning is broader than workplace learning, but in the context of the employment relationship it can be seen

as a means of adapting to change in the workplace and for increasing employability in the wider labour market. However, as Keep (1997) has argued, whilst there are good reasons for policy makers to place greater emphasis on individuals' responsibility for learning, there are structural and societal barriers confronting many adult learners. In practice the least skilled and least qualified are more likely to be unemployed than those with higher levels of qualification. The workplace is an important site of learning: both for formal learning opportunities—for example, through access to training and development—and to informal learning arising from social interaction and problem-solving activity. In a deregulated training system, where there are neither individual rights of access to training nor an obligation on employers to invest in training, an emphasis on individual responsibility for learning might be expected to reinforce patterns of inequality in access.

In order to understand questions relating to access to work-based training for unskilled workers, it is first necessary to investigate the context in which they and their managers make decisions about formal learning. This requires a dual focus: on the nature of work which is considered to have a low skill content and is of a routine nature, attracting low pay and status; and on the workers who occupy these positions in the structure of the organisation because of their low level of educational attainment and job aspirations, on the one hand, and/or because of their status as subordinate members of society, due to ascriptive characteristics such as class, gender and race, on the other. The extent to which access to learning is seen as linked to problems faced by the individual (intrinsic factors) or to the structural characteristics of the organisation of work (extrinsic factors) has consequences for the ways in which patterns of inequality in access are reproduced or can be challenged. In this context, it is important to develop an understanding of transformations in the nature of unskilled work which affect the learning and skill requirements of jobs as well as the interventions of collective actors, such as trade unions, in defending the interests of unskilled workers and in supporting a learning agenda. This contextual analysis can then serve as a basis for assessing the likely impact of public policy in the field of lifelong learning.

This article is divided into six sections. It starts with a focus on the individual and the processes whereby individuals are allocated to jobs which are classified as unskilled. It then examines the structural characteristics of unskilled work and how they relate to processes internal to organisations, such as the operation of internal labour markets. It then considers the changing nature of unskilled work and the extent to which management strategy promotes or creates barriers to learning amongst this section of the labour force. It then turns to the strategies of trade unions towards learning and, in particular, the extent to which they have succeeded in establishing training as an item on the 'new bargaining agenda' (Rainbird & Vincent, 1996). Consideration is given to the likely impact of public policy on the learning opportunities of this section of the workforce, following the proposals in the Fryer Report (1997) and the Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998). This is followed by a concluding section assessing their potential to counter the inequalities in access experienced by unskilled workers.

Who Gets Unskilled Jobs?

If we were to accept the assumptions of human capital theory, we would suppose that there was a relationship between the individual's level of investment in education and the returns in terms of their wages. We would therefore expect that those occupying the least skilled jobs, and receiving the lowest wages would have the lowest levels of formal education as well as investment in vocational training. Nevertheless, the relationship between the organisation of production and the ways in which individuals' capacities are realised through their work roles is more complex than this (Ashton & Green, 1996). Although there may be a correspondence between the output of the education system and employers' requirements for different types of labour, qualifications may serve as a sorting mechanism in recruitment rather than an indicator of productive potential. Recent increases in education participation rates and qualifications levels in the workforce require the development of a sophisticated explanation of the changing relationship between education, qualifications and labour market outcomes (see Brown, 1995, for example). Although it is conceivable that the availability of a well qualified workforce may contribute to the way in which work roles are structured, this does not preclude qualified workers from working in unskilled jobs, as Barthel (1993) has noted for German car assembly lines.

It is also important to recognise that work is organised to secure consent and control, involving the establishment of hierarchies and divisions within the labour force (Wilkinson, 1981). Whilst some segments of internal labour markets are organised around the stipulation of entry requirements in terms of qualifications, jobs are also characterised by the way in which they are stereotyped as being typically male or female. Feminist writers such as Phillips and Taylor (1980) have argued that the jobs that women do are classified as unskilled because of women's subordinate status in society rather than because of their objective skill content. Moreover, groups of workers organise themselves to defend their interests against the employer and against other groups of workers. These may be articulated in terms of claims to job territories based on concepts of skill, the relative worth of men's and women's work and the relative bargaining power of different groups of workers (Cockburn, 1983).

The point here is that there may be a disjuncture between what Cockburn calls the 'accumulated experience' of the individual, which might include educational experience as well as forms of on-the-job and job-related learning and the skill levels demanded by a particular job (Cockburn, 1983, p. 113). This disjuncture is most apparent in analyses of women's work, though it is also evident in studies of the labour market participation of ethnic minorities where racial discrimination contributes to patterns of segmentation. Particularly where women take on part-time work after a period out of the labour force in full-time child care activities, they experience downward occupational mobility and may be overqualified for the jobs they occupy. In the same way, Hoddinott's analysis of the basic skills crisis in the USA and Canada demonstrates that it was largely socially constructed by corporate interests. She argues that employers are usually aware of the limited demands of jobs

when they recruit workers with literacy problems and that many workers are overqualified for the low-skilled jobs that they do (Hoddinott, 1997). Therefore any analysis of unskilled work must take account of the factors which are intrinsic to individuals (such as their skills and educational qualifications) as well as extrinsic factors which concern their structural position in the organisation of production (the design and classification of the job, the possibilities for job progression). Both will impact on the individual's motivation to learn and on patterns of access to learning, training and development.

The Failure to Challenge an Absence of Learning Opportunities in Organisations

For most people, the workplace is the site of tertiary socialisation, after the family and the education system (Purcell, K., 1988). It is here that workers learn to modify their performance to understand their roles, including their gender roles, in the structure and interactions of the organisation. In this respect, job roles, position within a hierarchy and exclusion within or exclusion from career ladders can be seen as contributing to managers' expectations of employees' potential to learn and progress and employees' own aspirations for themselves. Given the power and authority relationships within the workplace, managers' expectations of employees can be significant both in reinforcing a lack of self-confidence in the ability to learn as well as in creating the conditions in which motivation and potential can be stimulated.

There are a number of reasons why existing patterns of access to learning and development opportunities are unlikely to be challenged. It has long been recognised that British companies invest relatively little in vocational training compared to their economic competitors (Keep & Mayhew, 1988) and that the British economy can be characterised as being trapped in a 'low skill equilibrium' (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). Great Britain is a country which is characterised by relatively low levels of educational attainment and poor levels of intermediate level skills (National Commission on Education, 1993). Although employers' failure to invest in training has been identified as contributing to the lack of competitiveness of the economy (House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee, 1994), state intervention has been eschewed in favour of a voluntary approach. There is no requirement on companies to spend a proportion of their payroll on training and this, alongside the absence of employee rights to training or an entitlement to a 'second chance' to education which is found in other European countries, has contributed to the reinforcement of labour market inequality. Adult employees' pattern of access to training provision is a complex one. On the basis of an analysis of the Labour Force Survey, Clarke argues that part-time workers have substantially less access to training than full-time employees and these are primarily women. Other groups of adult workers who are disadvantaged in terms of access are manual workers (mainly men), employees in small workplaces (mainly women) and employees in private manufacturing (predominantly men) (Clarke, 1991, pp. 41–42). Regardless of whether training is provided by the employer or whether self-motivated individuals take up education

and learning on their own initiative, similar patterns emerge. A survey in London conducted by the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education found that 'adult learning opportunities are available and taken up by those who enjoy an extended initial education, and by those who come from professional and managerial backgrounds' (1990, p. 1).

The short-termism of British financial institutions is frequently cited as contributing to employers' failure to invest in training. This is partly a problem of the availability of finance for long-term business projects and the pressures on companies to generate returns for shareholders. It is also reflected in company structures, the nature and spread of their investments and the criteria by which performance is assessed. Carey (2000) argues that many corporate structures militate against the integration of training and business strategies. Large corporations which have diversified into a range of unrelated businesses through acquisition may have little capacity for business planning. The 'financial control' companies exhibit a restricted role for corporate strategy outside the setting of financial objectives for business units and have little capacity for planning and influencing training. Carey argues that only those companies which have a series of closely related businesses utilising related resources and skills have the capacity to develop centralised strategies and plan their human resources effectively.

These weaknesses are reinforced by the division of responsibility for the training and development of different sections of the workforce between head office and the establishment level. In large, multi-establishment organisations, there is often a division of responsibility within the personnel function for management and administrative grades, on the one hand, and for manual and clerical grades, on the other. The former is normally a head office function and the latter is a divisional responsibility and is linked to bargaining structures. Purcell reports that the presence of a personnel director on the main board of companies was closely associated with responsibility for the management of managers and management development rather than responsibility for the management of staff across the board. Responsibility for the management of manual staff is generally a divisional responsibility (Purcell, J., 1988, pp. 61–63). This is confirmed by Marginson, who argues that in contrast to subjects (such as legal sanctions, pay and conditions) which may have ramifications beyond the immediate workplace, recruitment and training are 'very much operational matters' (Marginson, 1988, p. 196). Therefore, although the presence of a personnel director at board level may indicate a more strategic approach to the management of managerial resources, this may not be reflected in operating strategy, where establishment managers have control over human resource questions. Therefore the nature of the control and direction of head offices over the training of manual and clerical workers is less subject to head office control and more likely to experience conflicts between the long-term objective of staff development and the more immediate requirements of operating strategy (Rainbird, 1994, p. 73). There are therefore factors relating to the internal organisation of companies which contribute to a failure to develop a strategic approach to training in general, as well as to the relative neglect of particular groups within the workforce.

In addition to the formal structures of organisations, the management of the

labour force itself creates patterns of differentiation based on initial qualifications which have consequences for subsequent access to training and career development. Internal labour markets are found within large organisations and refer to the fact that the workforce is divided internally into different segments. These segments may be structured by occupation, the presence or absence of progression routes within occupations and differentials in wages and conditions of employment. This segmentation may be reinforced by industrial relations structures in the form of bargaining units covering different occupational groups (for example, manual workers, maintenance staff, white collar workers, managers and professionals). These occupational groups may, in turn, be represented by different trade unions.

As argued earlier, educational qualifications may serve as a means of differentiating the workforce on recruitment into the organisation. For more highly qualified occupations, there may be entry requirements which allow the individual to enter into a clear career progression route once inside the organisation. For those who enter with lower levels of qualification, it may be impossible to shift from one type of occupation to another within the organisation. It may also be difficult to obtain the appropriate training or recognition of skills learnt on the job which would allow for occupational progression. These barriers are difficult to surmount for manual and routine white collar workers and, in particular, to make the transition into professional work. The development of competence-based assessment and the possibility of accrediting prior learning through the system of National Vocational Qualifications appear to provide possibilities for recognising informal learning in the workplace. This may be useful in boosting the confidence of those who do not have qualifications, but nevertheless, it may be difficult to use this methodology to establish progression routes. This is because workers can only be assessed at the level at which they are currently performing. As a result, the assessment of supervisory capabilities, for example, is dependent on the worker having the opportunity to exercise supervisory responsibilities and to access a range of work environments which allow learning through experience to take place.

The extent to which industrial relations structures can inhibit job progression is breaking down to some extent with the replacement of multiple bargaining units with 'single table bargaining' and developments such as agreements on multi-skilling and flexible working practices. Nevertheless, the existence of job territories and demarcations, developed by workers as a mechanism for defending their interests against the employer and other groups of workers, have contributed to the creation of barriers to job mobility and progression within the workplace.

As there is no legal requirement in Great Britain for companies to make a financial contribution towards the cost of training their workforce, this also has consequences for the extent to which organisations develop formalised procedures for establishing resources for training and planning for their future workforce requirements. The 'Training in Britain' survey found that few employers attempt to cost their training activities and only 40% had a training budget (Incomes Data Services, 1990, p. 5). Although the practices of leading companies are well publicised, the extent to which practices such as skills audits and development interviews are practised on a systematic basis is unknown. Companies that have training and development prac-

tices which meet the criteria for the quality award 'Investor in People' must develop a systematic approach to assessing their training and development needs in the light of their business strategies, though this would not necessarily include provision for all categories of the workforce.

It has already been noted that managers and professionals have most access to training and development. This reflects their initial high level of education and the fact that management development is the most likely aspect of training to be integrated into business strategy and part of a head office human resource function. It is also the case that managers' training and development needs will be assessed systematically through systems of appraisal and development reviewing and that managers, too, will be more likely to be expected and take responsibility for identifying their own development needs. Amongst trainers it is also the view that 'training is a reward and nice training is a nice reward' (Holly *et al.*, 1998) and managers are the most likely recipients of such rewards. With other sections of the workforce, provision may be restricted to low-level customer service or organisational development training rather than training in transferable skills or opportunities for personal development. Moreover, at the operational level, questions of cover, leave, the need to maintain levels of production or service delivery may make it difficult for employees to be allowed time away from work for training. This is especially the case in 'lean organisations' where low levels of staffing make release for training and development difficult.

So far, the discussion has focused mainly on formal learning opportunities. The nature of the work performed by unskilled workers, alongside peer group pressure, may have the effect of limiting opportunities for informal learning. Writers in the anthropological tradition have argued that learning can take place in the work context in the absence of formal instruction. The concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' refers to the way in which individuals learn through ongoing social practice and are progressively initiated into a community of practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This focuses on the social context of learning and the role of learning from peers, as well as experienced practitioners and 'masters'. In this respect, the influence of managers and supervisors in promoting positive and negative attitudes towards learning will be significant as well as peer group pressure. For example, it has been reported that Rover managers have only recently recognised that 'with every pair of hands we get a free brain' (Social Justice Commission, 1994, p. 75). Willis' (1977) book *Learning to Labour* eloquently documents the anti-learning and anti-school culture of working-class boys which resulted in their eventual entry into manual jobs. These negative attitudes may also make it more difficult for individuals to participate in learning opportunities in the workplace. In research conducted for UNISON, a student on an employee development programme reported pressures from his male workmates in the following terms:

Verbally, I've had quite a lot of tripe from my fellow working man. Whether it's joking or a bit snide. Being a male and being from a hard background I can turn round and give it 'em back but there's a lot of people here that are a bit quiet and can't. (Munro *et al.*, 1997, p. 17).

A further factor contributing to the availability of learning opportunities in the workplace is the question of job design itself. Whilst Eraut (1994) has analysed the possibilities for informal learning and problem solving through the application of propositional knowledge amongst the highly qualified, for the unskilled, the very nature of their jobs may provide low levels of discretion and few opportunities to expand their knowledge. It is therefore no coincidence that forms of job rotation are often seen as a means of extending employees' experience and providing sources of work-related learning. The 'Take Ten' programme of Sheffield City Council and UNISON's Springboard project for its own staff are examples of this. The former used a system of giving women employees ten days placement in different parts of the City Council to open up their experience of job opportunities. The UNISON project involved developing an organisationwide approach to secondments and job shadowing, alongside mentoring schemes and personal development reviews for all staff. It also included examining job design and challenging the culture of long hours, alongside the more conventional establishment of targets for women's development and the promotion of networking (UNISON, 1998).

The Changing Nature of Unskilled Work

Whilst many unskilled manufacturing jobs have disappeared through restructuring and the introduction of new technologies, there are nevertheless many jobs in the service sector where the demands for skills will continue to be low and where some employers may be actively deskilling sectors of their workforce (McLaughlin, 1994, p. 15). In both the public and the private sectors the nature of unskilled work appears to be moving in two directions. The first of these is through subcontracting in the private sector or through mechanisms such as compulsory competitive tendering and market testing in the public sector, whereby some types of work have been 'distanced', and this has been accompanied by a deterioration in wages and conditions of employment. Employers may consider certain jobs which are routine and have a low skill content to be peripheral to their main activities and therefore appropriate to delegate to agencies and subcontractors (Atkinson, 1985). Once distanced, because these companies operate on the basis of reduced labour costs, the likelihood of investment in employees' training is low.

The second major tendency is the recombination of different aspects of work which may involve job enlargement and even multi-skilling. This can be observed particularly in the process industries where process work and maintenance work has been combined, resulting in the upgrading of unskilled and semi-skilled production jobs. It is also found in the public sector where managers have been pursuing the development of generic work organisation, which involves breaking down the traditional lines of demarcation between tasks. Generic working takes a variety of different forms, combining manual and clerical work, combining jobs previously regarded as male or female, such as cleaning and portering in the health service, or even combining manual and semi-professional caring activities (Munro, 1999). Such developments have been facilitated by the harmonisation of conditions and the introduction of a single pay spine in local government. In combination with

increased requirements for quality assurance and compliance with quality standards such as Investor in People, these developments are contributing to a new emphasis on training and development opportunities for unskilled employees and the potential for creating new routes into occupational qualifications and job mobility. The interactions of all these different elements on access to learning opportunities and inequality in work has yet to be assessed.

Where this emphasis on the training of employees is found it is often accompanied by employee development programmes. Examples of the latter are the Ford Motor Company's Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) and employee development programmes run by companies such as Peugeot and Rover. The latter provide educational opportunities for employees which are not work-related, though they may contribute to employees' adaptability to the work environment and their willingness to participate in training programmes which *are* directly work-related. In this respect, some groups of employees who have had little recent experience of learning may gain access to formal learning opportunities for the first time.

Trade Unions and the 'New Bargaining Agenda'

There has been considerable debate within the British trade union movement about the possibility of incorporating training, along with topics such as equal opportunities and environmental issues, into the collective bargaining agenda. Some unions have taken the view that in the absence of statutory entitlements to training, unions should seek these through collective agreements as part of an employee's wages and conditions of employment (see MSF, 1988). Others have emphasised the potential of training to constitute part of a new bargaining agenda based on a joint problem-solving approach rather than conflictual wage bargaining arrangements (Storey *et al.*, 1993). The joint management by managers and unions of the Ford EDAP scheme has been perceived as an exemplar of this approach.

Despite the greater prioritisation of training as a policy issue in the trade union movement which is evident in the Trades' Union Congress demand for a statutory levy and workplace training committees, most union strategies have been reactive to management initiatives rather than independent initiatives. In some instances, for example, in restructuring processes, this has involved the 'creaming' of sections of the unskilled labour force into technician grades (for example, the multi-skilling agreement at British Sugar) in others it has been part of the development of just-in-time management techniques and the so-called 'empowerment' of the workforce in 'lean' organisations, as at Rover. Here, management has been setting the agenda and unions have had the choice between rejecting it or attempting to influence the process of change. They have therefore had some scope to engage with what Hyman has called 'the qualitative dimension' of the discourse of human resource management (1994, p. 127).

An exception to this general pattern has been the public sector union UNISON, which, because of the unique circumstances of its creation from three public sector unions representing the full range of public sector occupations, has been significant

as a provider of learning opportunities through the UNISON Open College, free to members at the first three levels. Non-traditional learners are targeted through courses such as 'Return to Learn' (R2L) and 'Women, Work and Society' which provide study skills and build confidence to learn. Students on R2L have reported its transformative effect on their lives and many have progressed either into further and higher education or in their jobs, or have become more active in the union. The programme has been particularly successful in recruiting low-paid women workers with no formal qualifications who would otherwise have had little access to formal learning opportunities at work (Kennedy, 1995). By 1998 over 6000 students had completed the programme, either through the union's own provision or through a UNISON/employer partnership. This is a new departure whereby the employer provides paid study leave and contributes to the students' fees (Munro & Rainbird, 1998). The courses can be accredited for access to further and higher education and can also link in to vocational qualifications leading to professional recognition. Central to the development of UNISON's approach has been the recognition of the political significance of providing learning opportunities to members and their potential to serve as a tool for organisational renewal and for establishing channels of communication with the employer outside the conflictive wage bargaining relationship (see Munro & Rainbird, 1998).

The Lifelong Learning Agenda

Given the structural and societal barriers to learning which many adults confront in the workplace, it seems appropriate to assess the potential of the Labour government's proposals on lifelong learning to create a strategic framework for work-based learning and, in particular, to address the needs of those who have often been excluded from work-related learning opportunities. Unlike the Conservative government which argued that 'developing training through life is not primarily a government responsibility' (Employment Department, 1990), the new administration has recognised its responsibility for lifelong learning. This is evident in the appointment of a minister with this responsibility, the setting up of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (Fryer, 1997) and the publication of the Green Paper 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain' (DfEE, 1998). The Fryer Report recognises the need to construct 'a culture and coherent vision of a nationwide learning culture for the many and not the few, with shared responsibility for its achievement' (1997, p. 24). It identifies three different types of work-based learning: task-specific/job-related training; parallel and transferable skills; and personal development learning. It also identifies three principal stakeholders in work-based learning: the government; employers; and employees and their representative trade unions, who might be expected to make different financial contributions to the three types of learning. Particular concern is expressed for the need to promote the work-based learning of employees in small businesses and amongst the self-employed. Nevertheless, as far as concrete measures are concerned, it reiterates the proposals found in the Labour Party manifesto: the New Deal for the unemployed; the University for Industry; the creation of Individual Learning

Accounts; and the proposals for the National Grid for Learning. Whilst the need for inclusiveness is recognised, it is not evident how this will be delivered as far as work-based learning is concerned. The report states 'priority in workplace learning should be given to low-waged workers and those with the lowest levels of skill. It should be recognised that the principal responsibility for staff and skills development lies with employers' (Fryer, 1997, p. 53). In other words, although the weaknesses of a voluntary approach are recognised, encouragement and codes of good practice are the primary mechanisms suggested for achieving change.

Like the Fryer Report, 'The Learning Age' emphasises the shared responsibility of individuals and employers for increasing the quality and quantity of learning at work. The government's role is perceived as helping people invest in learning by 'lifting barriers to access and improving the quality of support available to businesses and individuals' and in combining 'effective pressure and support within an effective legislative framework' (DfEE, 1998, p. 33). The major legislative measure is the entitlement of 16- and 17-year-olds to undertake education and learning for one day a week. Unfortunately, its publication as part of the 1997 Teaching and Higher Education Bill means that few employers and training bodies are aware of its existence. Moreover, enforcement is likely to be problematic as this is reliant on young people taking their employer to an industrial tribunal. A commitment has been made to maintain the statutory powers of the Construction Industry Training Board and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (the only two sectors to operate a statutory training levy) and to support industries which wish to strengthen training through the operation of voluntary levy, as in the broadcasting and film industry. The Green Paper argues for regular monitoring of progress towards meeting national targets for workplace learning 'to see what further steps might be required to ensure that the needs of the economy are met' (DfEE, 1998, p. 34). However, the main measures mentioned to promote it are employee development programmes:

The Fryer report recommends the widespread establishment of company learning centres with strong links to the University for Industry. We propose to encourage this in both the public and private sectors, supported by individual learning accounts. Investors in People is launching a review of how best to incorporate approaches like this into the National Standard. (DfEE, 1998, pp. 34–35).

This is combined with an emphasis on developing partnerships with trade unions and support for innovative union projects in workplace education through the DfEE's establishment of a Union Learning Fund of £2 million in 1997. This has now been extended for a further three years and has the potential to encourage demand for learning from the bottom up. In the same way the TUC/Training and Enterprise Council's joint 'Bargaining for Skills' projects are also capable of stimulating the take up of NVQs and the Investors in People award as a mechanism for achieving national targets.

The Green Paper gives consideration to how learning in small firms can be promoted. Here, the role of the University for Industry is considered significant to

linking learning to business performance, in its ability to deliver custom-made courses to the company. Alongside this, employees will be able to use individual learning accounts to support their own career development whilst Investors in People UK will work with selected firms to demonstrate the business benefits of involving their suppliers in the IIP standard. Training and Enterprise Councils will focus on small and medium businesses in the workforce development plans and in encouraging take up of Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships for young people (DfEE, 1998, p. 37).

Other measures aimed at improving work-based learning include the promotion of good human resource practice amongst contractors on government contracts (i.e. a form of contract compliance); the development of a system for benchmarking companies' information on training investment in order to provide greater transparency about investment in training; the setting up of a National Skills Task Force to assess future skill needs; and the setting up of new employer-based National Training Organisations to promote occupational standards and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in their sectors.

Although there are a number of different measures being proposed, it is not yet clear whether they will add up to a coherent system. At present, the proposals seek to make the voluntary framework more effective. There are few measures which affect task-specific/job-related training and transferable/parallel skills; indeed, the main emphasis is on allocating resources to personal development through Individual Learning Accounts. Indeed, both the University for Industry and Individual Learning Accounts focus on the supply of training, rather than employers' demand for it. Moreover, in relying on individual initiative, they are more likely to provide resources for those who are already well-placed to access formal learning rather than providing the supportive infrastructure necessary to reach those who are excluded.

Despite the Labour government's recognition of its responsibility for lifelong learning, there is an ambiguity in the extent to which this extends to workplace learning. 'The Learning Age' states '[t]ransforming learning in the workplace will primarily be for employers, employees and the self-employed to achieve' (DfEE, 1998, p. 33). The government role is combining 'effective pressure and support within an effective legislative framework' (DfEE, 1998, p. 33). Despite the intention to 'encourage workplace partnerships between employers, employees and trade unions to promote learning' (DfEE, 1998, p. 43), a framework has not been specified. The 1999 Employee Relations Bill did not include the TUC's demand for trade union recognition for bargaining purposes to extend to training. Nevertheless, the logical outcome of a position which argues for employers and employees to take the primary responsibility for learning in the workplace, requires formal structures of representation for employees' interests.

Whilst the special needs of small businesses are recognised (DfEE, 1998, p. 37), this is one area where the need for collective provision, for example, through group training schemes, is of paramount importance. This is because individual companies are unable to provide the facilities and the breadth or range of work-based experience required to train effectively. Encouraging TECs to allocate Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships to small firms (DfEE, 1998, p. 41) is not an

appropriate way to encourage depth and breadth of training for young trainees. In contrast, the piloting of 'best value' contracts in the public sector is capable of encouraging subcontractors to develop human resource strategies. Of the measures proposed, the most positive and universal element is the introduction of a statutory entitlement for 16- and 17-year-olds to one day a week of education or training. Although this falls short of minimum levels of provision in other European countries, in combination with a minimum wage, this may act as a stimulus to improving companies' efficiency and increased investment in learning. As with workplace learning more generally, formal structures of representation for employees' interests are necessary to ensure that young people are able to take advantage of this entitlement in practice.

Assessment and Conclusion

In this article, the individual and structural barriers to unskilled workers' access to learning have been documented. Changes in the nature of unskilled work have been analysed. Some of these, such as the subcontracting of services, are reinforcing barriers to employees' access to learning whilst others are contributing to job enlargement and different forms of job recombination which bring with them greater requirements for training and development. Alongside this, employers' concerns with improving the quality of goods and services, their interest in meeting quality standards such as BS5750 and Investors in People, contribute to an environment in which training and development may be attributed a higher profile. Simultaneously, in the past decade, British trade unions have become increasingly aware of the significance of education and training to their bargaining strategies, although this has often been reactive. It is important to assess the impact of these different developments on access to formal learning opportunities at work as well as on workplace inequality more generally.

Whilst it is early to be making an assessment of the Labour government's interventions in the field of lifelong learning, the evidence from two key policy documents, the Report of the National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (Fryer, 1997) and the Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998), suggest that a voluntary approach will continue to be adopted in the field of vocational training, with the danger that this will reinforce patterns of inequality of access. This is not to deny that there is a role for mechanisms such as Individual Learning Accounts (especially if they are well targeted and jointly managed) and the establishment of learning centres in workplaces through the University of Industry. The workplace is an important arena through which adult employees can access learning, but if employees are to take responsibility for learning, especially those that have been most disadvantaged in the past, then the need for a collective voice must be recognised to counteract the imbalance of power between the individual and the employer. Until training and skills development are treated as a collective good regulated by all the stakeholders (not just employers) and employees have an entitlement to the different types of work-based learning and are supported by structures which positively encourage them to take

advantage of them, it is difficult to see how patterns of inequality of access can be effectively challenged.

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