

Learning in the Recession: implications of the recession for adult learning and skills in the English regions

**Report by the National Institute of Adult Continuing
Education**

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Executive summary

1. About the project

This report sets out the findings of research into the impact of the recession on learning and skills policy and provision in the English regions. The project was carried out by NIACE between June and October 2009.

The project aimed to:

- compare different regional and sub-regional experiences and responses;
- illuminate the demands, needs, responses and challenges arising from the recession in relation to a range of areas including: skills and employability training; learning in and for work; literacy, language and numeracy; information, advice and guidance; and informal adult learning.

Evidence was gathered through:

- field work consisting of in-depth interviews and discussion groups with regional partners;
- desk research to identify key policy issues and research findings.

Findings and conclusions from the research will inform NIACE's policy development work locally, regionally and nationally. They will be of interest to other agencies, organisations and stakeholders by contributing to the identification of learning and skills interventions that will help to secure future recovery and meet the challenges presented to the economy, society and individuals by the recession.

2. Key findings

Adult learning and skills occupies a central place in policy responses to the recession. This is a novel feature of the current recession compared with those of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and reflects the strengthening of the strategic relationship of learning and skills policy with economic policy over the past decade. For organisations across the sector, this has presented an opportunity to assert the strategic and operational importance of learning and moved it up regional and sub-regional agendas.

The narrative of the recession is one of change and variation. It is having differential impacts across a range of indicators: by region; by sector; by age; by gender; by skills levels; by existing position in the labour market; and over time. The progress of the economic downturn and recession since 2008 has been uneven, and has affected different parts of the economy, and hence different parts of the country and groups in society, more acutely at different times. For instance, the early downturn was felt most severely in London and the South East and within the financial and service sectors. Subsequently, the brunt of the recession has been borne in the North and Midlands, by the manufacturing and retail sectors, and by low paid workers. Young adults, and those at some distance from the labour market, are experiencing particular difficulties in relation to unemployment. The persistence of at

least partial gender segregation across large parts of the labour market means that women and men are being differently affected, as the recession progresses.

Despite this diversity of impact, policy responses to the recession have been based chiefly on the implementation of standard, centrally developed models and programmes. A striking degree of consistency is apparent across the regions in messages about responses to the recession in relation to adult learning and skills. Local and regional determination of need is subordinated within this approach. Similarly, with the exception of initiatives targeted at young adults, there is little evidence that national initiatives take sufficient account of variables such as gender in formulating policy interventions.

The centralisation of responses to the recession may be preventing local and regional agencies from developing more effective and tailored approaches to addressing the situation. In some instances, existing specific structures and process within individual regions have provided a platform for taking forward work to address the recession. Where this has happened, such as in the North East and West Midlands, there are suggestions that it has enhanced the ability of regions to apply the lessons of earlier recessions and develop more effective approaches to dealing with the challenges they face this time round. Ensuring that national regional and local agencies have sufficient scope to interpret policies flexibly, in line with their own contexts and needs is therefore critical.

Implementing national policies designed to deal with the immediate consequences of the recession is hampering the ability of regional and sub-regional organisations in most regions to focus on longer term, strategic planning in line with regional and local interests. Whilst organisations recognise the importance for recovery of maintaining a strategic focus and developing work in key areas such as skills activism, for many their time and resources have been diverted into implementing emergency measures to tackle business contraction, redundancies and unemployment. In addition, the recession has challenged fundamental economic assumptions on which pre-recessionary learning and skills policy was based, and new agendas set out for recovery have yet to gain consensus. Under these circumstances, it is vital that organisations have the space to consider and debate the emerging economic picture - nationally, regionally and locally – and to explore the implications of this for longer term, strategic planning.

Demand for learning and skills development opportunities from individuals has increased dramatically as people seek to strengthen their labour market position. This trend has been encouraged by key policy interventions designed to support people through redundancy and unemployment, and is apparent across a range of contexts. It is also putting pressure on some parts of the learning and skills system, in particular:

- Information, advice and guidance services are facing substantial growth in demand, in terms of both the volume and range of clients, which they do not always have the capacity to meet.
- Formal learning opportunities are being sought by increasing numbers of individuals, as an alternative to or in addition to work.

- Demand for and participation in literacy and numeracy learning is rising, and this is widely attributed to increased identification of need among people participating in response to redundancy initiatives. High levels of unmet need in relation to ESOL were reported across the regions. There is evident need for continuing support for LLN learning.
- There is anxiety about the capacity of the system to meet the growing demand for apprenticeships, as employers in both the private and public sectors seek to reduce their workforce expenditure.
- Third Sector organisations are experiencing a rise in demand for volunteering placements by people out of work wishing to use volunteering as a way of developing their workplace skills and remaining socially engaged. Policy responses which include learning and skills components are driving this increased demand. The associated change in the profile of volunteers is placing a high level of support requirements on the sector.

Opportunities for learning at work have reduced as a result of the recession.

The focus of public policy interventions is overwhelmingly on providing support and training to move people into work, with an attendant reduction of emphasis on learning to support workplace development and progression. Many employers have responded to the more difficult business climate by reducing their investment in staff training and development. At the same time, there are exceptions who are training their way through the recession.

The recession has provided impetus for the integration of employment and skills (IES). This is apparent both in IES Trials areas and elsewhere. The implementation of learning and skills policy interventions to deal with the impact of the recession has rested on closer co-operation between regional agencies, and although challenges remain, it is evident that Regional Development Agencies, Learning and Skills Councils and Jobcentre Plus are developing closer working relationships at both strategic and operational levels.

The connections between learning and skills interventions which have an explicit focus on developing workplace skills, and informal learning opportunities are under-developed. At regional level, there has been little or no attempt to link informal adult learning to responses to the recession in a strategic way. The potential contribution of informal adult learning to supporting individuals and communities through the recession has not been prioritised.

3. Implications for regional agencies

The research findings highlight key areas to which regional and sub-regional agencies and other organisations will want to pay attention in moving towards recovery:

- Ensuring that employment and skills strategies and interventions are sufficiently flexible and nuanced to respond to the needs and circumstances of different regions, sectors and social groups.

- Maintaining a focus on longer term strategic planning, to ensure that policy development supports organisations, individuals and communities to anticipate the emerging learning and skills needs of the economy and society as the country moves into recovery.
- Drawing and building on successes from the IES Trials to develop integrated employment and skills approaches across the regions. Central to this will be the identification of and provision of support for potential growth sectors, and the development and deployment of high quality regional, sub-regional and local labour market information to underpin skills and employment support services.
- Ensuring that strategies are in place to bring about the inclusion of adults furthest from the labour market including adults with mental health problem, long term unemployed adults and some groups of women.
- Developing more literacy, language and numeracy provision that is responsive to employability.
- Supporting employers to maintain staff training and development across all areas and grades, as part of a wider focus on business planning and development for the longer term.
- Developing strategies that recognise the contribution that informal learning can make to recession survival and recovery, as part of a wider approach which seeks to address the social and economic impacts of recession in a coherent way.

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the research

This report sets out the findings of comparative research undertaken between June and October 2009 by NIACE into the impact of the recession on adult learning policy and provision in the nine English regions.

Observations from NIACE's regional work suggested that:

- funding and organisational effort is being increasingly directed towards alleviating the effects of the recession. This may have shifted the focus of regional learning and skills policy priorities, with greater focus being given to responding to the immediate and pressing challenges presented by redundancies and unemployment at the expense of strategic planning for the longer term;

and

- there appear to be differences and similarities in and between regions in both the focus and effects of these responses.

NIACE's regional staff, with their in depth knowledge of regional structures, policy and practice, are well-placed to undertake field research to gather evidence to illuminate these questions. The insights yielded by the research will support NIACE's policy development work locally, regionally and nationally, and inform its ongoing work for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

1.2 Aim and objectives

The overarching aim of the project is to shed light on the role of adult learning in an economic recession.

The project's objectives are to:

- compare different regional and sub-regional experiences and responses;
- investigate demands, needs, challenges and responses arising from the recession in relation to a range of areas, including: skills and employability training; learning at and for work; literacy, language and numeracy; information, advice and guidance; and informal adult learning;
- strengthen NIACE's strategic relationships in the regions.

1.3 Methodology

We adopted a qualitative approach, as set out in the table below.

Method	Purpose
Desk research to examine current policy and research findings	To provide context and a frame of reference for the analysis of findings from the field research.
Interviews with key partners	To identify: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• views on the changing demands and needs of individuals, communities and workplaces arising from the recession;• the challenges that the recession poses to organisations and partnerships;• examples of innovative and effective responses. (A copy of the interview framework can be found at Appendix 1.)
Regional discussion groups	As for interviews. Discussion groups were not held in all regions.
Analysis	To provide thematic and comparative analysis of research findings.

1.4 The report

This research sheds light on the ways in which the learning and skills landscape in the regions is being impacted by the recession, from the viewpoints of key individuals with responsibility for taking forward policy and practice on the ground. As such, it provides a snapshot of experiences and perspectives, and does not seek to offer a comprehensive account of the effects of the recession in each of the regions. It is also worth stressing that, whilst the Regional Programme Directors worked within a common research framework, decisions on interviewees and discussion groups reflected regional circumstances and priorities. A consequence of this approach is that the field research did not cover identical ground in each region. This ensured that a rich range of topics was discussed over the whole research although not all issues were raised in every region. We have tried to be sensitive to these differences, and to avoid making assumptions where subjects are not covered in detail.

The report is organised into five sections as follows:

The **Introduction** sets out the aim and objectives of the research and describes the approach adopted by NIACE.

Section 2 briefly outlines the policy context for the research, in order to provide a frame of reference for the findings from the field work.

Section 3 discusses these findings under thematic sub-sections covering: regional priorities; employment and skills; literacy, language and numeracy; informal adult learning; and variations between sectors and sub-regions.

Section 4 proposes conclusions from the research.

Appendices contain supporting materials.

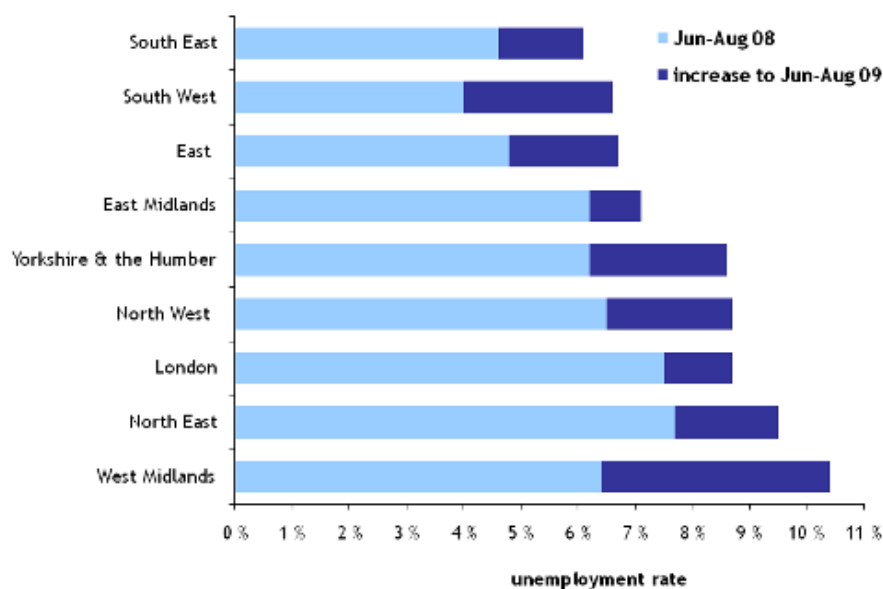
2. Background and policy context

2.1 Recession in the English regions

Since the beginning of 2008, the impact of the downturn has been apparent across the economy, spreading from the financial services industry to the housing market, manufacturing and retail and other service sectors. The UK officially entered recession at the end of 2008, following two successive quarters of negative economic growth (falling GDP). In November 2009, it was the only G20 nation still in recession.

The effects of the downturn and recession on the labour market are the most significant from the perspective of adult learning and skills. Business failures and the contraction of operations leading to both redundancies and a reduction in the number of vacancies have fuelled rising unemployment. According to data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), there has been a rise in both the number of people who are unemployed and the unemployment rate (i.e. the percentage of the economically active population who are unemployed). The number of unemployed people rose from around 1.6 million to 2.46 million between January 2008 and September 2009, an increase in the UK unemployment rate from 5.2 per cent to 7.8 per cent (ONS, 2009).

Increase in unemployment rate on year (Jun-Aug 08 - Jun-Aug 09)



Source: Office for National Statistics (Labour Force Survey, seasonally adjusted data)

Fig. 1 Increase in unemployment rate on year (Jan-Aug 08 – Jan-Aug 09) in the English regions (Source: West Midlands Regional Observatory: www.wmro.org.uk.)

All nine English regions have experienced a rise in the rate of unemployment. However, as Fig. 1 above shows, there are differences between regions in both the rate of unemployment and the rate at which this has grown over the past eighteen

months. The West Midlands now has the highest unemployment rate of any region, and has experienced the highest rate of growth in unemployment. The South East has the lowest unemployment rate, and the smallest rate increase has been in the East Midlands.

It is becoming apparent that different regions are being more severely affected at different times as the recession progresses, and as the wider effects of difficulties in one area of the economy take time to manifest elsewhere. The trajectory and impact of the downturn across places and sectors has proved highly unpredictable. For example:

- During the first quarter of 2008, London had the highest regional unemployment rate. This development was driven by the crisis in the banking and financial services sector and high-profile retail business failures. It focused attention on the apparently distinctive characteristics of this downturn as a southern phenomenon targeting the professional and businesses classes.
- By the second half of 2008, evidence was pointing to a deepening economic crisis in manufacturing, construction and retail, as businesses found it increasingly difficult to access credit. By this time, the highest unemployment rate and largest numbers of business failures were being registered by the North East. Speculation grew that this region would be hardest hit by the recession.
- Since then, the West Midlands has emerged as the region with the highest unemployment rate, again underpinned by significant job losses in the manufacturing industry. Inevitably, this region is now predicted to be the most severely affected.¹

This example illustrates the difficulty of either obtaining an accurate picture of the current effects of the recession or predicting the direction it will take next. It is widely recognised that unemployment lags behind overall movements in the economy, and commentators suggest that the recovery, if and when it comes, is likely to be uneven. Some sectors may recover quickly, while others continue to struggle and may indeed face further contraction.

2.2 Sub-regional variations

Variations in the impact of the recession are evident not only between but also within regions. A modelling exercise commissioned by the Local Government Association predicts that very marked variations at local level from the national economic performance average will be a key characteristic of the recession (PACEC, 2008). This appears to be the case. Across London, for example, high increases in the rates of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance (the 'claimant count rate') were registered in Barking and Dagenham, Greenwich, Hackney and Havering, as against

¹ ONS, 'Unemployment rate by Government Office Region,' <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/lm-interactive/unemploy-lgor.asp>. Examples of press coverage of the progress of the recession can be found at www.bbc.co.uk and www.guardian.co.uk.

low increases in the City of London, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster. In the South West, the claimant count rate for the year to October 2009 rose by twelve per cent in Swindon and by 66 per cent in Cornwall and Torbay.² However, rate increases need to be understood within the context of initial claimant numbers. Figures from the North East illustrate the complexity of the picture. Unemployment in both Tynedale and Sunderland grew by just over 70 per cent in the 19 months to September 2009. In numerical terms this meant an increase of 385 individuals for Tynedale compared with 4,286 in Sunderland (One North East, 2009).

These brief observations indicate a number of issues relevant to this research. First, 'the recession' is not a simple, coherent phenomenon. Its effects need to be recognised as complex, progressive and multi-stranded. Secondly, responding to the recession poses complex challenges for the regions, not least because of this unpredictability. Thirdly, there is a temptation – arguably fuelled by media interest – to focus on what is novel about this recession, which can tend to obscure the extent to which this recession bears hallmarks of those which have gone before.

2.2 The national focus on learning and skills

Enhancing our understanding of the ways in which the recession is impacting upon adult learning policy and provision, and the implications of this for learners, is important for at least two reasons:

- Responding to the recession has become a dominant concern across domestic policy at both national and local levels.
- To an extent unseen in previous recessions, adult learning and skills is being positioned as central both to dealing with the immediate consequences of the recession and to preparing society to take full advantage of the anticipated recovery.

In December 2008 the House of Commons Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills argued that

Skills policy could be the key factor which determines how and when the UK economy recovers and grows.

(Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008)

Organisations from the TUC to the Institute of Directors and the CBI have espoused the common message that investment in skills development is essential to equip individuals, businesses and the nation to confront successfully the challenges that the recession presents (TUC, 2009b; IoD, 2009; CBI, 2009).

This emphasis is not surprising. Over recent years, the strategic relationship of adult education policy to economic policy has been strengthened. The value of adult learning and skills has been defined increasingly through its contribution to economic

² www.press.southwestrda.org.uk

development and national economic competitiveness. Raising skill levels across the workforce, thereby transforming the UK into a high-skill economy, has been a key aim. *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: world class skills*, the final report of the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006) argued this case, and set the direction for all subsequent skills policy. With the onset of the recession, the efficacy of Leitch's prescription of a 'demand led' system, in which employers and individuals would be empowered through a range of measures to shape provision in line with their needs, has been questioned (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008). Most significantly, the concept of 'skills activism' has emerged as part of a broader 'activist' approach to industrial policy which reasserts the strategic role of government in enabling and shaping the market. The policy statement *New Industry, New Jobs* sets out this agenda, arguing that strategic interventions by government, aligned with the needs of industry, are needed to support the economy through the recession and beyond (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. *New Industry, New Jobs*: four priority areas for action and reform

Innovation

Strengthen research and development in science and technology, including potential growth markets such as low carbon technologies; increase R&D spending as a proportion of GDP; ensure that knowledge is more consistently translated into commercially successful goods and services.

Skills

Invest in education and skills to create a talented, entrepreneurial workforce, addressing Britain's comparative weakness in low and intermediate skills and building higher level skills and specific skills for a modern economy.

Finance

Ensure access to capital for growing businesses, addressing market failures which limit access to finance for young, small and social enterprises.

Infrastructure

Reform the planning and regulation systems to encourage investment across the energy, communications and transport infrastructures.

In the case of education and skills, this activist approach means that,

We require a skills system that not only responds to demand but is also able to anticipate future growth in the economy.

(HM Government, 2009)

This is a change of emphasis not a new ambition. The consistent policy message is that skills have never been more important to the UK's economic competitiveness in general, and can help to put businesses and individuals in a better position to gain competitive advantage when economic growth returns.

2.3 Learning and skills national policy responses

Alongside this strategic concern to focus learning and skills towards addressing the impact of the recession, a number of specific national initiatives have been launched that aim to provide more immediate opportunities for skills development for individuals facing difficulties in the labour market. Developing their skills is perceived to be the best way to equip individuals either to retain the advantage they need to stay in work during these challenging times, or at least to be ready to move into employment once the economy begins to recover. Key initiatives include:

- **Response to Redundancy.** This programme includes £100 million to be administered through the LSC (and its successor bodies) between April 2009 and December 2010, as part of a wider package of support to businesses and individuals. £50 million have been diverted from each of the ESF and Train to Gain budgets to boost skills interventions for people in the following three categories:
 - under notice of redundancy;
 - recently redundant;
 - unemployed and could be made ready for work with this skills development support package.

Providers funded through the programme are required to develop working links with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) in order to ensure that training and skills development are linked to current and anticipated future opportunities within local labour markets. They must also seek to continue to support individuals' skills development once they move into work via mainstream Train to Gain funding (LSC, 2009). Indicative volumes for delivery have been stipulated by region, sub-region and sector.

- **Jobcentre Plus initiatives.** Increased funding has been made available to extend the Jobcentre Plus Rapid Response Service, which provides access to a skills assessment and job-focused training for employees facing redundancy in organisations where twenty or more people are being made redundant. £27 million of new ESF money is being invested in up to three projects per region to help people improve their skills, find and retain work (DWP Press Release, 04/11/08). For people who have been unemployed for six months or more (the so-called 'Six-month offer') half a billion pounds from DWP and BIS has been made available to provide a package of more intensive and personalised support including access to work-focused training and volunteering options.
- **Future Jobs Fund.** This initiative has a particular focus on helping young unemployed people (18-24). In common with previous recessions, steeply rising youth unemployment is a dominant feature of this downturn. Nearly 20 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds are now unemployed and looking for work (November 2009). Graduate unemployment currently stands at around 8 per cent for those who graduated in 2008. The Future Jobs Fund provides around £1 billion to support the creation of 150,000 new jobs, two thirds of which will be targeted at young people (aged 18-24) who have been out of work for a year. From early 2010, everyone between the ages of 18 and 24 who has been looking for work for a year will get an offer of a job, work experience, or training lasting at least six

months. It is intended that 10,000 of the jobs created will be in 'green' industries and 15,000 in social enterprises.

- **Apprenticeships.** Funding of £140 million has been released to create 35,000 new apprenticeships. Adults aged 25 and over are eligible for apprenticeship funding subject to the demand for skills in the local labour market. Data on the take up of adult apprenticeships indicates that there has been a dramatic increase in demand for this type of learning. In 2007-08 the number of over-twenty-fives starting an apprenticeship increased to 27,200 from 300 the previous year. This figure increased by 227 per cent in the following year (LSC, 2009a). Evidence from the National Apprenticeship Service suggests that this growth has been due to employers enrolling existing staff on the apprenticeship programme as a way of boosting their skills, rather than redundant adults seeking to re-skill.

Overall, the policy response to the economic downturn and recession has been a national one. However, responsibility for key aspects of implementation has been devolved to the regions. Regional Development Agencies have been charged with ensuring the co-ordination of action among the various agencies and organisations involved in delivery of the initiatives, to ensure a coherent approach that meets regional employment and skills needs. RDAs, the LSC and JCP are required to work together to develop regional action plans to align their funding to deliver support to both businesses and to individuals affected by redundancy or unemployment. At the same time, it is expected that sub-regional and local partners will work to ensure that discretionary funding for which they are responsible (such as Working Neighbourhoods Fund) complements this wider action.

The abolition of the LSC and transfer of responsibilities to the Skills Funding Agency and Young People's Learning Agency by March 2010 will have implications for the delivery of initiatives designed to deal with the effects of the recession and stimulate recovery. In 2009, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills outlined proposals to make RDAs responsible for producing regional skills strategies under the new arrangements. This would further strengthen the role of RDAs in relation to skills, and more explicitly connect skills policy and economic development policy at regional level.

3. Findings from the field research

3.1 Regional policy priorities

Across all regions, interviewees in both strategic and operational roles acknowledged that the recession is forcing a revision of regional learning and skills policy priorities. There is a recognition that, as one London interviewee put it, regional skills strategies that were in place at the start of the downturn had been developed for a 'different time' and new approaches were required. Interviewees in the East of England, East and West Midlands and London talked of working in a 'post-Leitch' environment, as if to underline the sense of a break with the dominant pre-recession agenda. This is a concept that would bear further interrogation.

3.1.1 Immediate and strategic issues

Beyond this broad consensus that the recession has made a difference, two distinct lines of argument can be discerned. The majority of interviewees in most regions were unequivocal in arguing that the recession has forced a fundamental shift in focus from the longer to the immediate term. Several alluded to a 'policy tension' between the pursuit of regional strategic aims and the need to respond to immediate concerns. Policy was described as being 'reactive', based on 'short termism,' and formed to deal with the pressing challenges posed by large scale redundancies. In particular, the implementation of the high profile Response to Redundancy initiative, with its added emphasis on concerted action from partners at all levels, appears to have drawn attention towards the prominence given to 'emergency' measures. Interviewees from the North East and the East of England described the abandonment of planning for growth in the face of the need to deal with short term issues. One interviewee in the East Midlands argued responding to the recession had caused valuable policy initiatives, such as National Skills Academies, to be de-prioritised. Overall, the majority of those interviewed took this line and the message was particularly consistent from the East of England. Only in the North West and the West Midlands was this view not expressed by any interviewees.

A rather different assessment of the situation was offered by other interviewees, albeit in smaller numbers. They stressed that, whilst dealing with the immediate consequences of the recession is inevitably dominating short term priorities, this does not indicate that a strategic focus and planning for the longer term have been neglected. Interviewees from the West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber expressed the view that the strategic goals for the region remain the same; it is rather the approach to reaching them that has changed. In other words, the recession has altered the detail of policy implementation rather than its overall intent. Where this perspective was articulated, it tended to be by individuals occupying senior roles within regional strategic agencies such as RDAs and Government Offices, although not all such interviewees shared the view. Unionlearn representatives also adopted this position, stressing that whilst they had focused additional effort on supporting members through the recession, it had not fundamentally altered organisational priorities. So too did an interviewee with a strategic role in Higher Education, who distinguished between the specific HE initiatives targeted at individuals whose labour market position had been made

vulnerable by the recession (including the provision of short, employment focused courses for un- and under-employed graduates), and the consistent focus on the 'bigger picture' that was being maintained by HEI's in their strategy and planning.

A number of interviewees in London and the South East expressed a particular perspective on the question by pointing to the context provided by the approach of the 2012 London Olympic Games. Existing Olympic strategies were seen as offering a range of potential opportunities for employment, learning and skills development which could be harnessed to help address the effects of the recession.

3.1.2 Skills activism

Nevertheless, it is clear that some fundamental assumptions which previously underpinned strategic planning, such as the inevitability of economic growth and the expansion of the labour market, have been challenged. The starting point has shifted from growth to recovery. Several interviewees highlighted the influence on strategic thinking in their regions of *New Industry, New Jobs*. Anticipated future growth areas for the UK identified in the strategy include low carbon industries (the so-called 'Green economy') and biosciences, as well as those driven by broader demographic change such as the care, hospitality and leisure sectors (HM Government, 2009). In the East of England, London, the West Midlands and the South West, interviewees highlighted the green industries as a potential growth area for the region. A number of interviewees noted that, reflecting this interest, a greater focus on climate change issues is apparent at the levels of both strategic planning and curriculum development with the learning and skills sector, to support people to train and retrain for work in this area.

Others, from among those who perceived policy as having become overwhelmingly reactive, struggled to see how this new approach could be realised. They argued that skills activism could not find a place on an agenda dominated by short term policies, and questioned how realistic an approach it was anyway given the difficulty of predicting what the growth sectors will be after the recession. Some respondents expressed the view that traditional sectors would be at least as important as new industries in the post-recession economy.

For some, the recession has presented an opportunity to raise the profile of employment and skills issues on the local agenda. As one participant in a discussion group in the North East remarked, the message is that we are to 'train our way out of the recession.' From the East of England and the South East, for example, it was reported that a greater focus on unemployment is evident in some Local Area Agreements. In parts of the South East, local authorities started 'recession surgeries' to signpost individuals and businesses to relevant agencies. Led by the Local Strategic Partnership's Skills and Enterprise Group, these have been championed by elected members and supported by Business Link, JCP, adult community learning, housing and information, advice and guidance providers.

3.1.3 Priority groups

Interviewees pointed to a number of social groups that had emerged as priorities for policy as a result of the recession and for whom specific interventions were urgently

needed. Two in particular stand out. First, unprecedented levels of redundancies among highly skilled, professional workers, most of whom had no previous experience of unemployment were identified as a new challenge for most regions. Several interviewees argued that mainstream services to help unemployed people are not equipped to meet the needs of this group. Across the regions, new arrangements have been developed between JCP and Higher Education careers services in order to secure provision appropriate for those with higher level skills.

Secondly, rising unemployment rates among young people are a chief focus of concern across all regions. This category includes both young school leavers with few qualifications and unemployed graduates. Interviewees highlighted the importance of young people with different backgrounds and skills levels getting the help that is right for them.

3.2 Integrated employment and skills (IES)

More effective integration of the UK's employment and skills systems was a central plank of the Leitch agenda. It called for coherence, at both strategic and operational levels, in order to ensure that skills development reflected the needs of the labour market and individuals were supported both to move into employment and to further develop their skills and progress when in work. Existing skills and employment services were seen to be hampered in their capacity to help people by the fact that they were pursuing fundamentally different aims, rather than working in concert to improve their clients' opportunities. From autumn 2008, the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) Trials project has tested different approaches to integrated employment and skills in four regions: the West Midlands, the East of England, London and the South East. The focus has been primarily on joining up the services offered through the LSC and JCP.

Interviewees across regions both with and outwith IES trials were unequivocal in stating that responding to the recession has given momentum to partnership working and the integration of employment and skills planning and delivery. This is not surprising. As was noted above, central government has charged the regions with leading collective action on the downturn. RDAs, the LSC and JCP are required to work together to align their funding and planning to deliver a coherent response to employment and skills needs in their region. Strategic relationships between Regional Skills Partnership partners have been considerably strengthened. Joint regional action plans, with a strong focus on the implementation of Response to Redundancy, have been produced by IES Trials regions, with implementation groups that also include Government Offices and local authority representatives. The aim of these approaches is to gather and share intelligence in relation to the various skills and employment support programmes managed by the three partners, ensure co-ordination, reduce duplication and provide ease of access for employers and individuals. Appendix 2 illustrates how the East of England region is seeking to knit together the various strands of publicly funded support that are available to employers and individuals in the downturn.

Interviewees indicated that progress has not always been straightforward. The weakness of existing relationships between some agencies in some regions means that considerable time and effort have been required to make them work. One

interviewee from London argued that there is still some way to go to get all the relevant agencies co-operating on the ground.

Outside the IES Trials regions, reports of progress made on the integration of employment and skills were especially striking from the North East. Participants at one of the discussion groups held there described how the recession has provided a stimulus to greater coherence. The region already had in place a Regional Employability Framework which sought to join up the work of strategic partners to address the issues of economic under-performance and worklessness. These structures have been strengthened in response to the recession to ensure effective implementation of IES locally. They argued that this approach is actually ahead of that developed through the IES Trials.

Messages from the South West were decidedly mixed. Some interviewees there recognised both greater coherence in the way that LSC and JCP funding is being used, and more evidence of inter-agency collaboration through client referrals. Others argued that strategic integration is not necessarily mirrored at operational level, development remains patchy, and services working directly with clients still need to join up. They highlighted a range of practical issues which are hampering progress towards more effective joint working, some of which were raised in other regions. These include:

- lack of common targets;
- lack of shared management information systems;
- a shortage of suitable accommodation to enable co-location of JCP staff with *nextstep* advisers.³

3.3 Learning in and for work

A further leading feature of the skills agenda set out in the wake of the Leitch Review was the focus on supporting people to develop their skills not only to enter employment but also to progress in the workplace. Across all regions, the consistent message from interviewees was that this is no longer the case. They argued that the focus of policy, and the accompanying funding, is directed overwhelmingly towards getting people – and especially the newly redundant – into work. Little attention is now apparently paid to progressing people who are in work, whatever national policy rhetoric may assert. A variety of oppositional pairings were used by interviewees to describe this shift: re-skilling, not up-skilling; pre-employment rather than in-employment support; learning for, not learning in, work. Driving this situation is the redirection of funding from Train to Gain and ESF, which would otherwise have been available to support skills development, into redundancy measures.

3.3.1 Demand from individuals

At the same time, and again the picture is common across the regions, increasing levels of demand for skills from individuals were reported. Interviewees pointed to personal investment in skills development as one of the ways in which people newly redundant, who fear an uncertain employment future, or who are unable to find work,

³ *nextstep* is the national service providing careers information, advice and guidance to adults.

are seeking to strengthen their position in the labour market. High demand for HE and FE places, including Foundation Degrees, was highlighted. Interviewees also pointed to growing demand for apprenticeships, but expressed concern that private sector employers are not in a position to provide sufficient places to meet that demand. Several interviewees argued that for some people, redundancy represents an 'opportunity' for improving their skills or developing them in a new direction, although it was noted by one respondent that the withdrawal of public funding for adults seeking equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ) is making it problematic for graduates who want to re-train in response to the changing economic context.

A particular dimension of this increased demand from individuals for opportunities to develop skills and prepare to return to the workplace has been a rapid expansion in demand for volunteering placements. Interviewees with a direct or indirect role in relation to the Third Sector from across the regions highlighted this growing phenomenon. It has been fuelled by anti-recessionary policy initiatives like Future Jobs Fund which have identified work-focused volunteering as a viable and appropriate alternative to paid work where this is not available. Interviewees pointed to the challenges this increased demand poses for Third Sector organisations.

Their resources are put under additional pressure, with the need to manage, train and place new volunteers, at a time when the recession was also producing a simultaneous drop in income and increased demand for front-line services. As one interviewee from the East Midlands observed, the expectations of individuals who pursue volunteering primarily to develop their skills rather than to support a cause, can present an additional burden to organisations. These findings reflect the results of regional and national surveys undertaken into the impact of the recession on the Third Sector, which identify a range of factors linked to the recession that are contributing to a growing demand on the resources of Third Sector organisations (NAVCA, 2009; COVER, 2009).

It is vital that organisations are supported to respond positively and effectively to this demand for volunteering placements. Volunteering plays an important role in providing people with an opportunity to sustain and develop their skills for the workplace. However, it also makes a wider contribution to supporting the wellbeing of individuals and communities during the challenging times presented by a recession. It offers a way of remaining socially engaged to people affected by unemployment, and can provide a focus for collective action for communities faced with the dislocating and damaging effects of recession.

3.3.2 Employer demand

Evidence in relation to employer demand for skills and training points overwhelmingly towards a shift in priorities and reduced and more focused investment. A number of interviewees from the East and West Midlands argued that large employers in particular are maintaining their investment in staff training, despite the recession. Indeed, one of the West Midlands interviewees asserted that the region's employers are showing a higher level of commitment to staff training than those elsewhere. However, a more widely held view was that overall employers are cutting back significantly on staff training and workforce development activities. This opinion was expressed by interviewees from most regions. Where employers are

continuing to invest in training, it tends to be for very specific provision to address immediate business needs, rather than to support more generic skills development for longer term growth.

These findings broadly reflect the messages from wider research undertaken by the Institute of Directors and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils. The Institute of Directors' survey of members found that employers are continuing to invest in training, in contrast to the picture in previous recessions, and suggested that expenditure in this area has held up better than in other areas of business spending. But at the same time, investment has been cut, and what remains has shifted to 'essential' training for immediate operational purposes, rather than 'investment' training with a longer term strategic focus. SSCs across all sectors reported that there had been an overall reduction in employers' expenditure on training, with many businesses focusing only on mandatory training or skills development to enable individuals to perform their role effectively. This 'rebalancing' was attributed to the need to redirect resources towards surviving the recession and protecting jobs. SSCs expressed concern that, by shifting expenditure away from skills development, businesses may be compromising their capacity to take advantage of opportunities that emerge once the economy begins to recover (ASCC, 2009).

It is important not to let this focus on what employers are able and willing to invest from their own resources obscure other aspects of this issue raised by interviewees in the regional research. Across several regions, the point was made that the redirection of Train to Gain funding has reduced opportunities for learning in the workplace. Interviewees from Yorkshire and the Humber and the South West remarked that employers were keen to carry on training staff but could no longer access publicly funded provision and were unwilling to pay for it themselves. A similar point was made by an interviewee from the North West, who noted that demand from businesses for leadership and management training remains buoyant thanks to investment in provision by the RDA.

3.4 Demand for and supply of information, advice and guidance services

Information, advice and guidance (or careers advice for adults as it is increasingly termed) has emerged as a key element of learning and skills policy in recent years. The requirement that JCP and *nextstep* services work closely together, developing effective systems for the cross-referral of clients and ideally with advisers from the two agencies physically working alongside one another – 'co-located' – is, as was indicated above, one of the cornerstones of integrated employment and skills, and has gained additional impetus as a result of initiatives designed to support individuals adversely affected by the recession.

One of the most strikingly consistent messages to emerge across the regions as a result of this research is that the recession has generated an immense increase in demand for IAG services. This increase is evident in relation to both discrete services delivered through *nextstep* and JCP, and services embedded within HE, FE and Third Sector organisations. The growth in demand for discrete services is directly linked to Response to Redundancy and other recessionary initiatives, which have increased the numbers of referrals. Changes to the eligibility criteria for *nextstep* services, to make them accessible to individuals with high levels of

qualification but little or no experience of unemployment and limited job-search skills, have been a particular driver of demand. Meanwhile IAG services embedded in colleges, HEIs and Third Sector organisations have seen demand grow as individuals opt to continue or return to learning in the face of a challenging labour market.

Interviewees from several regions described specific approaches, strategic and operational, that are being developed in order to try and deal with this explosion in demand. In the East Midlands, for instance, a regional strategic network, Advice East Midlands, has been established in an effort to co-ordinate services. In the North West and the South East, the Adult Advancement and Careers Service prototypes currently running in the regions were identified as having been an encouragement to more effective co-operation between JCP and IAG advisers. Also in the North West, the regional LSC has produced a *Handbook for Practitioners*, setting out details of all the LSC-funded support available to employers and individuals affected by the economic downturn, including specific support to deal with redundancies and unemployment (LSC North West, 2009). In the South West, learning champion and peer mentoring programmes are being developed as a way of meeting demand more effectively.

It is clear that this growth in demand poses a significant challenge for agencies supplying IAG services. Interviewees across the regions reported evidence that capacity in both *nextstep* and JCP is under severe pressure. Planned closures of JCP offices in the East of England region, for example, have been deferred. The rapid recruitment of large numbers of new JCP advisers has raised questions about the extent to which they have received adequate training to equip them with the skills fully to support their clients, and interviewees from three regions raised this point. The manager of a *nextstep* regional prime contractor also argued that the demands now being placed on *nextstep* staff to work with a wider range of clients in more complex circumstances serve to underline the extent to which current training and qualifications for advisers – and in particular NVQs – are not fit for purpose.

3.5 Implications for different social groups

As we have already noted, the impact of the recession has not been experienced in a uniform way either between or within regions. There has also been a sectoral dimension, and evidence is beginning to emerge which suggests that this, together with other factors linked to pre-recession labour market positioning, is producing a differential impact on different social groups.

It is apparent from the interviewees' responses to the question about which sectors have been most severely affected that the impact of the recession is being felt to some degree across almost all areas of the economy. This mirrors the findings of research undertaken by the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils with its members (ASSC, 2009). A number of interviewees from across the regions said it was difficult to see a definite pattern to redundancies within their regions. As one interviewee in the North West explained, even within individual sectors there can be variations. So, for example, the retail sector as a whole is struggling, but supermarkets are taking on additional staff. However, it is also clear that there are some sectors which are being particularly hard hit. Consistently, interviewees identified manufacturing and

retail as the sectors which are among the worst affected. Alongside these, construction, engineering, finance (in the South East and North West) and food processing (in the East of England and East Midlands), were also mentioned.

The impact of the recession on the public sector has yet to be fully felt, although there is some evidence that contraction in this area is already taking place. The interviewee from one local authority in the East of England, for example, pointed to significant redundancies across the council. With all the major political parties pledging to cut government spending as part of the effort to tackle the UK's budget deficit, substantial job losses across public sector services are inevitable.

3.5.1 Workers in low paid jobs

This sectoral pattern suggests that it is almost certainly not the case that workers in professional roles are bearing the brunt of the recession. It is true that redundancies among professional, highly skilled workers in the business and finance sectors attracted the headlines in the early months of the downturn, and finding ways of supporting redundant professionals has provided a novel challenge for publicly funded employment and skills services. In addition, as some interviewees observed, some professional level unemployment may remain 'hidden' because individuals do not access Jobcentre Plus services (for example, because they do not perceive these as appropriate for them, or because they have other sources of adequate household income). However, as wider research shows, this recession bears some of the hallmarks of previous recessions, with a severe effect on manufacturing industry and the highest redundancy and unemployment levels among low qualified, low skilled workers. The heavy job losses in the retail sector, where many low paid, low skilled jobs are found, have added to the picture (TUC, 2009a; Valtilingam, 2009; LSN, 2009). Anticipated cuts in government spending can be expected to fall heavily on low paid public sector workers.

The plight of unemployed low skilled workers is exacerbated by the fact that they are likely to find it more difficult than those with higher skills levels to move back into work, and spend longer than other groups on Jobseekers' Allowance (TUC, 2009a). It is revealing of the fact that it can take time for these messages to become clear that only one interviewee, in the South East, remarked during our research on the disproportionate impact of the recession up on low skilled workers, and in doing so they cited no more than 'anecdotal evidence.'

3.5.2 Gender dimension

There is an important gender dimension that is not always recognised. Data on the impact of the recession on women and men reveals a complex picture. With higher numbers of women in work than in earlier recessions, higher numbers than ever before are inevitably at greater risk of redundancy. Since the start of 2008, the increase in the rate of redundancies for women has been higher than for men. Meanwhile, job losses in female dominated sectors such as retail, and anticipated redundancies across the public sector, are all potentially significant for women (TUC, 2009). One interviewee in the South West observed that there has been a marked increase in demand from women for IAG to support them to become self-employed, and this may reflect a rising level of female unemployment. Groups of women

furthest from the labour market, for instance some Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Somali women (Ward 2008) are also more likely to remain excluded in a recession as attention is focused on those already in, or actively seeking to access employment.

At the same time, the term 'mancession' has been coined to suggest that it is male workers who are bearing the brunt of the recession. Statistics suggest that the number of men in work is at its lowest for a decade. This has been attributed to large scale redundancies in traditionally male dominated construction and manufacturing, and high levels of female employment in less vulnerable public employment sectors, particularly health and education.⁴ However, it is important to look beyond the numbers. In the quarter to November 2009, around 50,000 men lost full or part time jobs, whilst 120,000 women gained part time work. The expansion of part time relative to full time employment opportunities raises questions about the nature, quality and rewards of the work that female workers are obtaining. Is it the case that secure, well paid full time work is being replaced by low paid, less secure part time employment?

The field research helps to shed some light on this issue. Across all regions, a strong message is that care is one of the few sectors that is continuing to expand through the recession, as a result of demographic change. This growth raises difficult questions. Care remains a female dominated sector, often exhibiting all the worst of what that implies in terms of low status and low pay. One interviewee argued that this poor image and pay mean that it is not regarded as offering viable alternative employment for many who become redundant. The difficulties of recruiting to this sector have not yet been addressed through improvements in pay, conditions and status recognition.

3.5.3 Groups furthest from the labour market

Regional evidence suggests that individuals further from the labour market have become even more disadvantaged as a result of the recession. Interviewees across the regions pointed to a number of reasons why this is the case.

- Resources have been shifted to fund interventions designed to deal with large volumes of people and to help those who are newly unemployed or at least capable of being made ready for work with relatively limited support.
- Employers can now pick from a larger pool of potential recruits, and long term unemployed people fare badly in competition with more highly skilled, motivated individuals with recent knowledge and experience of the world of work.
- IAG and employment services tend to deal with the clients who are easy to move back into work, and so enable advisers to meet their targets, at the expense of working with more challenging clients.

Among those interviewed, several from the North East, North West and South East stressed that specific attention is being paid to supporting groups on the margins of the labour market (for example, young people, long term unemployed, and people

⁴ See, for example, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article6917363.ece>.

who are not in work due to ill health or disability) in order to try and avoid repeating the mistakes of previous recessions in which whole sections of society were effectively excluded from work. However, it is clear that preventing this from happening poses a significant challenge.

It is also important to remember that blanket concepts such as 'youth unemployment' risk disguising a broad range and diversity of experiences. Analysis of available data suggests that the two largest cohorts of unemployed young people are those with qualifications below Level 2 and those with qualifications above Level 4. The latter group are a distinctive feature of this recession, but they are also better able to re-engage with the labour market. They may experience periods in temporary employment as well as unemployment, and may not face the chronic exclusion to which their less well-qualified contemporaries are vulnerable (LSN, 2009).

3.6 Literacy, Language and Numeracy

Evidence from across the regions suggests that policy interventions developed in response to the recession have led to an increase in participation in literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning. The delivery of Skills for Life diagnostics is a key element within Response to Redundancy programmes, and this, together with screening by JCP of new unemployment benefit claimants has resulted in the identification of individuals who require support in this area, and provided for their referral on to LLN provision. A number of interviewees took pains to stress that what is being witnessed is not an increase in overall levels of LLN need within their region, or even necessarily increased demand for LLN from individuals. Rather, they defined it as the identification of existing low levels of skills as a result of rising unemployment.

ESOL was highlighted as an area where there is a high level of unmet need in some regions. Interviewees from London consistently referred to it, and argued that because the lack of appropriate English language skills impedes the capacity of individuals to move into work, it could hinder efforts to combat the recession in the region. This is particularly crucial as many migrants have high level skills and experience that are underexploited as language prevents them accessing employment in these fields, often condemning them to unskilled work. Outside London, in regions which have received particularly high levels of EU migrant workers in recent years (the East Midlands, South West and East of England), interviewees suggested that there was increased demand for ESOL provision from among this group. However, the picture is not straightforward. Overall, numbers of migrant workers appear to be falling, a trend that has been attributed to the impact of the recession on employment opportunities (and data from the East of England appear to support this view (EEDA, LSC and JCP, 2009)). But among those who elect to stay, there is a recognition of the need to develop their language skills in order to compete effectively in a more challenging labour market.

3.7 Informal adult learning

The informal adult learning white paper argues that:

Informal learning is important at any time. But during an economic downturn it is essential. ... [T]here is a moral imperative to find activity with purpose for those affected by the recession. ... People on reduced hours or looking for work may have the capacity to teach or volunteer as well as more time to devote to learning (DIUS, 2008).

Despite this assertion, the research indicates that IAL has not become a policy priority in any of the regions. No region reported having a regional strategy or implementation plan for *The Learning Revolution* and informal adult learning is not profiled in skills strategies and recession recovery initiatives. Responsibility for taking the work forward instead appears to rest with local authorities and local partnerships. This is not to suggest that interviewees did not recognise the value of IAL. A number of those interviewed in the East of England and the South West articulated its importance in sustaining self-esteem, confidence and a sense of wellbeing among people adversely affected by the recession.

But at the same time, they expressed anxiety about where the funding for this activity will come from once the bulk of the funding released by *The Learning Revolution* ceases in March 2010. Across the regions, it was stressed that the focus of attention for the learning and skills sector, at both strategic and operational levels, is on supporting activity that explicitly seeks to develop employment related skills. An interviewee in the North West argued that the value of IAL is not well understood by most JCP advisers, so does not feature as part of their approach to supporting their clients' employability skills development. Several interviewees pointed to reduced opportunities for informal learning in the workplace, although from the East Midlands, it was suggested that some employers are seeking tailored IAL to address specific needs in preference to accredited learning programmes. From the East of England, two interviewees also argued that there was evidence of a move in colleges away from providing learning aimed specifically at adults, in order to focus attention and funding on young people not in education, employment or training.

4. Conclusions

4.1 A consistent picture

Learning and skills policy responses to the economic downturn and recession have been developed at national level, with implementation via the regions. The messages from our research suggest that this approach has contributed to a remarkable degree of consistency in the ways in which responses to the recession have played out across the regions. Certainly, there is evidence that existing regional structures and processes have shaped implementation to some degree. For example, the North East has been able to draw on mechanisms established in the wake of earlier recessions to inform current action, and regions with IES Trials highlighted how these developments have underpinned recession responses. However, our findings suggest that overall there are considerably more similarities than differences between regions in the implications of responses to the recession for learning and skills policy and provision.

4.2 Pressure on the system

Faced with declining opportunities in the labour market, individuals are seeking ways to boost their position and gain competitive advantage, both for now and looking forward to recovery. Learning and skills development plays a central role in these coping strategies, and is encouraged through key policy interventions designed to support people through redundancy and unemployment. But at the same time, the recession is putting pressure on some parts of the learning and skills system. In particular:

- Information and advice services are experiencing a huge growth in demand which they do not always have the capacity – in terms of staff numbers or skills – to meet. Yet these services are critical for supporting people both to move into employment and to make meaningful use of time spent outside of paid work.
- Access to learning opportunities through the workplace has declined. Reductions in employers' investment in staff training and development may not be as severe as in previous recessions, but they are still widespread. What workplace training remains is focused overwhelmingly on providing skills to meet immediate business need rather than supporting longer term strategic growth plans.
- There are anxieties about the capacity of the system to meet the growing demand for some kinds of learning. It is not clear how sufficient apprenticeship places will be supplied, as private sector companies reduce their investment. Expectations that the public sector would step in to fill the gap must now be cast in doubt with the inevitability of substantial cuts in public spending to address the UK budget deficit.
- Dramatic growth in demand for volunteering placements from individuals seeking to develop and sustain workplace skills through this route is straining

the capacity of the Third Sector at a time when many organisations' revenue is falling and demand for their core services is growing.

- Informal adult learning is not being incorporated into regional responses to the recession, and nor are coherent frameworks to support informal adult learning being implemented at regional level. This suggests that the contributions that informal adult learning can make to both individual employability skills and the wider wellbeing of individuals and communities under stress are not being adequately exploited.

4.3 Short term focus

Dealing with the immediate and pressing emergencies of business contraction and rising unemployment has, perhaps not surprisingly, become the primary concern of learning and skills policy interventions. Regional and sub-regional agencies are accordingly finding that work with a relatively short term focus on addressing redundancy and unemployment is now occupying the bulk of their attention. Strategic planning is being hampered by both the diversion of resources towards reacting to the current crisis and a sense that confidence has been shaken in predicting the sources of recovery and future growth.

4.4 Integrated employment and skills

The impetus which the recession has given the development of integrated employment and skills (IES) underlines the caution with which notions of a 'post-Leitch' world should be approached. The targets embedded in Leitch are now embedded in IES policy. The challenge for IES is to move from a concept that is closely aligned to the unemployment and re-entry to the employment market to an overarching concept that encompasses all sectors of non-compulsory learning and all types of paid work and other activities. Recognising and strengthening the connections between the individual, social and economic purposes of learning will be vital for rebuilding the economy and society moving out of recession.

4.5 Marginalised groups

The exclusion of people furthest from learning and the labour market is deepening, and being exacerbated by some policy responses to the recession. It is clear that unemployed people are not a homogeneous group. Those who have been unemployed for six months or longer are now even more likely to find it difficult to obtain sustainable employment. They face a contracted labour market and greater competition from those who are recently unemployed and have more current workplace skills. Youth unemployment is emerging as one of the major policy challenges from the recession, but here too it is clear that there are different kinds of young unemployed. Under-25s with low or no qualifications lack the positional advantages of young unemployed graduates, who may in fact displace them in the competition for entry level jobs.

4.6 A new conceptual framework?

The recession has substantially altered the context for and focus of national and regional learning and skills policy planning and implementation. Prior to the

economic downturn, the dominant frame of reference for conceptualising economic development was growth. Whilst returning to growth as quickly as possible remains the main policy objective, this is now tempered by the notion of recovery. Assumptions about the inevitability of growth have been fundamentally challenged, and the shaky foundations on which significant aspects of the UK's recent ostensible prosperity have been built have been exposed.

Reports of the 'death of Leitch' have certainly been exaggerated, but there is a sense from some quarters that these are now very different times from that in which *World Class Skills* was produced. The national policy focus has largely shifted to skills activism. Suggestions from the regions that growth sectors of the future are likely to include low carbon industries and the care sector hint at an emerging recognition of the impact of structural change, including climate change and demographic change respectively. These factors are driving social change and responding to this shifting global context arguably demands a fundamental reappraisal of the values and principles of national economic development.

4.7 Moving forward

The above findings highlight key areas to which regional and sub-regional agencies and other organisations will want to pay attention in moving towards recovery:

- Ensuring that employment and skills strategies and interventions are sufficiently flexible and nuanced to respond to the needs and circumstances of different regions, sectors and social groups.
- Drawing and building on successes from the IES Trials to develop integrated employment and skills approaches across the regions. Central to this will be the identification of and provision of support for potential growth sectors, and the development and deployment of high quality regional, sub-regional and local labour market information to underpin skills and employment support services.
- Ensuring that strategies are in place to bring about the inclusion of adults furthest from the labour market including adults with mental health problems and long term unemployed adults.
- Developing more literacy, language and numeracy provision that is responsive to employability.
- Supporting employers to maintain staff training and development across all areas and grades, as part of a wider focus on business planning and development for the longer term.
- Developing strategies that recognise the contribution that informal learning can make to recession survival and recovery, as part of a wider approach which seeks to address the social and economic impacts of recession in a coherent way.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Adult learning in the recession: topic guide for Interviews with key partners

1. Introduction

This topic guide has been prepared in order to ensure a degree of consistency and comparability of data across the regions. The five headings indicate the broad areas to be addressed and the aim should be to include some consideration of each of them during the course of an interview. Sample questions are included, but these are intended to be indicative rather than prescriptive in recognition of the fact that regional concerns and priorities will determine the precise focus of discussions.

The interviews should aim to identify **demands, needs, challenges and responses** in relation to adult learning during the recession in your region in the subject areas.

Issues raised in the interviews should be summarised in the data analysis framework provided, and returned to Catherine Dunn by **[date]**, together with your notes of the discussion.

2. Discussion guide

Theme 1: regional priorities

- What impact has the recession had on learning and skills policy priorities in the region?
- To what extent has there been a shift in the balance of focus away from longer term issues towards more immediate concerns?

Theme 2: employment and skills

- What impact has the recession had on the development of integrated employment and skills?
- What impact has the recession had on learning in and for work?
- What impact has the recession had on demand for and supply of IAG services?

Theme 3: informal adult learning

- To what extent are implementation plans for the Learning Revolution being shaped by the recession?

Theme 4: literacy, language and numeracy

- What impact has the recession had on demand for and supply of LLN provision?

Theme 5: variations across the region

- To what extent and in what ways are variations in the impact of the recession been sectors apparent?
- To what extent and in what ways are variations in the impact of the recession between different geographical areas (urban, sub-urban, rural, coastal) apparent?
- What are the implications for learning?

Appendix 2

East of England framework for integrated employment and skills: detailed customer journey

See separate sheet.

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