

# Acknowledgements

This Executive Summary is based on the First Year Report from the project produced by Dr Emma Wallis and Dr Mark Stuart of the University of Leeds Business School. The full report may be accessed on the Campaign's website at [www.campaignforlearning.org.uk/equal](http://www.campaignforlearning.org.uk/equal).

Equal is a transnational programme and the project has links with European partners in Finland and Germany. Further information on work undertaken by these partners, including a report on promoting and celebrating Equality and Diversity in the workplace, is available at the web address above.

We would like to thank everyone involved in this project for their valuable and ongoing contribution to a better understanding of workplace learning.

We would specifically like to acknowledge:

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- The Action Research Organisations:
  - Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
  - Bradford Metropolitan District Council
  - Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
  - Leeds City Council
  - Nestlé UK
  - Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
  - Tibbett & Britten
  - Warrington Borough Council

- Development Partners supporting dissemination and implementation of interventions:
  - Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit
  - Basic Skills Agency
  - Care Sector Trust
  - Centre for Enterprise
  - Department of Trade and Industry
  - Employers' Organisation for Local Government
  - Improvement and Development Agency
  - Learning and Skills Council
  - NHSU
  - NIACE
  - Northwest Development Agency
  - T-Mobile
  - TOPSS
  - Trades Union Congress
  - UfI/learnDirect
  - UK BusinessLab
  - UNISON
  - Workplace Basic Skills Network
  - Yorkshire Forward

**"For me the Equal Project has raised awareness of learning opportunities for the older generation. I'm doing ECDL at the moment and I'm sure that helped me to get this job with the Library Service."**

*Richard Lowry – Library Assistant,  
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council*

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# Workplace Learning Action Research Project Summary



## *First Year Results*

March 2004



**Equal**



EUROPEAN UNION  
European Social Fund



**CAMPAIGN  
FOR LEARNING**

## About the project

The Campaign for Learning is an independent charity working for an inclusive society in which learning is understood, valued and accessible to everyone as of right. During 2001 the Campaign was awarded funding from the Equal programme of the European Social Fund (ESF) to conduct a three-year programme of action research of workplace learning. The results of the first phase of this are summarised in this report. The Campaign applied to Equal because a key strategic objective under the Adaptability theme fitted closely with the Campaign's ongoing interest in understanding how best to raise demand for learning among low-skilled employees, and the difference that this would make both to their productivity and wider life chances.

The project's strategic direction and achievement against its objectives are steered through a Development Partnership (DP), which has representatives from all the participating organisations. Action research is being conducted within eight organisations in the North of England - a group of three Local Authorities and one private sector company in the North West and an exactly parallel group in Yorkshire & Humber. The eight organisations which agreed to participate in the research are all committed to developing their workforce and identifying ways in which this might be achieved. Each organisation decided on the most productive focus for the research according to its organisational characteristics and needs: some involved all employees, some worked with all workers

on a specified site or sites, while others wished to focus on specific Departments. In all organisations, care was taken to ensure that employees working in lower-skilled posts were well represented in the research cohort.

*"Leeds City Council are committed to developing the capability and capacity of the workforce so that we can meet the challenges of public service. We are signed up to the Equal Project to help us better understand basic skills needs across the Council and will use the findings of the project to inform a Council-wide basic skills development strategy. Already we are seeing the benefits of raising awareness and gaining support to tackle this critical issue for a modern employer."*

*Helen Grantham - Head of Service, Planning and Performance, Leeds City Council*



# Action Research organisations:

## Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

Employs 5,676 staff. Two Departments are participating in the research: Direct Services (674 employees), and the Department of Culture, Leisure and Sport (396 staff). Staff employed within the Home Care Service and the Older People's Services (part of the Department of Social Services) have also been included.

## Bradford Metropolitan District Council

Employs 20,414 staff. The Department of Environmental Protection and Waste Management (600 staff) is participating in the research, with specific focus on the service areas of Waste Management and Fleet Services, which employ 419 and 62 staff respectively.

## Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

All 4,757 employees are involved in the research. Individual interviews were conducted with the Department of Social Services (1000 staff), the Department of Leisure and Community Services (600 staff), the Department of Environmental and Operational Services (1700 employees) and the Department of Corporate and Customer Services, which includes staff in the Office of the Chief Executive (491 staff).

## Leeds City Council

Employs approximately 35,000 staff. There are two participating teams: the Department of Social Services' Home Care Service, which employs 2,296 staff, and the Department of Contracting Services' Cleaning Service, which has 1,437 staff.

## Nestlé UK Ltd

Nestlé is one of the world's largest food and beverage companies, which employs 254,000 staff worldwide. The research involves staff at the Halifax plant in Yorkshire, which employs 727 staff in the manufacture of confectionery products and related support activities.

## Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Employs approximately 14,500 staff. Teams within three Departments are involved in the project: Building Cleaning Service (800 staff), located within the Economic and Development Services Department; the School Kitchens Service, part of the Department for Education, Culture and Leisure

Services (600 staff); and Refuse Collection, part of the Department for Housing and Environmental Services (100 staff).

## Tibbett & Britten Ltd

Tibbett & Britten is a UK-based international group of companies that provide distribution and logistical support services for a range of major retailers and manufacturers, and has a global workforce of 38,500. The site at Preston Brook near Runcorn, a dedicated contract depot supplying the B&Q retail chain in the UK, is participating in the project; 900 staff are employed there.

## Warrington Borough Council

Employs almost 9,000 staff. There are two participating Departments: Social Services (which employs 1,058 staff), and Direct Services and Housing Department (1,308 staff). As a result of restructuring in 2003, Direct Services and Housing expanded to incorporate further services and was re-cast as the Neighbourhood Services Department.

## Development Partners include:

- Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit
- Basic Skills Agency
- Centre for Enterprise
- Department of Trade and Industry
- Employers' Organisation for Local Government
- Improvement and Development Agency
- Learning and Skills Council
- NHSU
- NIACE
- Northwest Development Agency
- Trades Union Congress
- UFI /learndirect
- UK BusinessLab Ltd
- UNISON
- Workplace Basic Skills Network
- Yorkshire Forward

# Recommendations



This report covers the first year of a three year project, and the research is therefore still at a relatively early stage. Further in-depth interviews with participants and their frontline supervisors and managers are under way, a second questionnaire is planned, and substantial work linking results with organisational characteristics, policies and productivity is yet to be undertaken. The researchers would nevertheless propose the following recommendations from the findings thus far.

- The participating organisations are strongly committed to employee development, as demonstrated by their policies, practice and from discussions with senior staff - not to mention their involvement in this project. However, this commitment and the range of opportunities open to all their employees might be communicated more clearly.
- Intra-organisational differences in learning cultures and in the availability of learning opportunities should be addressed, given the negative impact that this has upon employee attitudes to learning and perceptions of employer commitment to employee development.
- An approach to employee development where employers fund staff to engage in non-work related learning along the lines of the Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) model could be particularly useful in encouraging employees to engage in workplace-based learning activities.
- Organisations should capitalise more on the support and enthusiasm for learning which appears to exist at shop-floor supervisor and middle management level, as such support is key in encouraging employees to participate.
- Workforce development could be more systematically integrated within broader approaches to human resource development in many of the participating organisations.

*"I've worked for Nestlé for over 20 years and was keen to get involved with the Equal Project as it seemed a really good opportunity for everyone here. I've now got myself a computer through a scheme run within the Project and I am now in a class to learn all about it. It's the best thing I've ever done. I can learn at my own pace with this and it's given my confidence a real boost."*

*Frances Anderson –  
employee,  
Nestlé UK*



*The Campaign is working on a separate follow-up action research pilot on support for workplace supervisors with Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and UNISON, which is due to report in December 2004*

# Action Research Methodology

At the start of the project, the Action Research (AR) organisations each employed an Action Researcher to take responsibility for work on this project. Recruitment to these posts was undertaken by each organisation according to its own policies, using a common job specification. In the event, all organisations recruited from within their own ranks, with the result that the Action Researchers were familiar with the context, in most cases were known by at least some of the employees they were working with, and had greater credibility in many situations than researchers brought in from outside.

For the first stage of the research, organisations identified a wider group within their organisation to provide background information for the study. Employees in this group all received questionnaires asking about their attitudes to learning and what motivates them to learn. It was felt that to delve in detail into individual employees' basic skills needs at this early stage would be intrusive, so organisations simply undertook to ensure that groups of employees who traditionally had less access to training and were employed in jobs requiring fewer qualifications were well represented in their research group. The wider research group varied from an entire Council (Knowsley MBC) through a named site (Nestlé UK Ltd and Tibbett & Britten Ltd) to specific Departments or teams within Departments.

In total, around 14,500 questionnaires were issued, of which 2,700 were returned. We recognise that a methodology based on a questionnaire poses specific problems when the target group is employees with basic skills issues. However, the questionnaire was carefully designed to make it as user-friendly as possible, with substantial input and support from members of the Development Partnership, and in most organisations project staff, Union Learning Reps and other learning champions played a key role in helping target employees complete the questionnaire. The broad scope of the questionnaire provided essential background information on employees' experiences, attitudes to learning and perceptions of their organisation which it would have been impossible to obtain through one-to-one interviews. Thereafter, however, the focus of the research moved to more detailed interviews.

Approximately 40 volunteers per organisation were selected from the questionnaire respondents, who were subsequently interviewed on an individual basis. Around 100 interview transcripts in total were analysed for this report.

In addition, all the AR organisations provided information about their workforce development plans and policies, to provide additional contextual information and a comparison with employees' perceptions.



## Focus of the research

The overall aim of the project was *'to evaluate "what works" in raising the demand for learning in large organisations and the difference that this makes.'*

Within this framework the following specific research objectives were set:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of different promotional approaches, incentives and support structures in engaging employees with low levels of skills, including basic skills, in workplace learning
- To evaluate the effectiveness of different forms of learning provision in terms of their impact on employee skill levels, productivity, employability and ongoing motivation for work and learning
  - To evaluate the overall impact of working to engage employees with low basic skills in learning on organisational culture and effectiveness



# Findings

The key messages emerging from the first year of the research are these:

- Demand for learning is already high in these organisations, with a large majority of employees within the participant organisations indicating that they would like to undertake formal learning activities in the future.

*"I would like to be able to learn something and gain a qualification. It would make me feel I had achieved something."*

- Intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors are most likely to motivate employees within the participant organisations to undertake learning activities – for example, the chance to study a subject which interests them appears to be more important than expectations of promotion as a result.



- Employees within the participant organisations would be most likely to engage in learning at work if there were no restrictions on the type of learning that they were able to undertake. Many respondents, for example, expressed enthusiasm for Employee Development Scheme approaches in which employers encourage learning which is not strictly work-related.

- Employees within the participant organisations felt that their line managers actively encouraged staff to learn. This is a particularly significant finding, which challenges previous research that has suggested that line managers can often 'hold back' learning initiatives (see for example Sisson and Storey, 2000 and Santos and Stuart, 2003).

*"Yeah, it was initially my team manager. I'd said to my team manager, 'This is what I'd really like to do, I'd like to train people, and in nice ways, not sit down and lecture ways, you know...' She said had I thought about practice teaching, and I said yes, and she kind of went out and sorted the course for me."*

- The workplace is felt to be an appropriate site for learning, with informal and experiential forms of learning seen as particularly appropriate within this context by employees within the participant organisations.

*"...my boss in work, she educates you on the hygiene and cooking and everything you know. You ask her questions and she knows it all you know. She's very good... cutting tomatoes... she learned me a way so they don't fall apart sort of thing..."*



- All the participant organisations encouraged employees who wished to improved their knowledge and skills. However, perceived differences in the availability of learning opportunities between Departments had a clear negative impact on both employees' attitudes to learning and how committed to learning they felt their organisation to be.

*"...you speak to other people in the Council... 'Oh we do this, we do that, we have leeway here, we're allowed to do this, we can go there and this course is coming up and that course is coming up' ...She's on Social Services side, and she tells me things, and I'm thinking, hang on, we don't even get mentioned."*

- More than three quarters of employees within the participant organisations who responded to the questionnaire were involved in workplace learning. Unsurprisingly, therefore, respondents were to some extent a self-selecting group, with those already involved in learning appearing more likely to respond to the questionnaire.





- Employees in the participant organisations commonly reported that they were able to apply the knowledge and skills they had learned during employee development activity within the workplace. This is a particularly interesting finding given that previous research has estimated that only 10 per cent of training expenditure results in the transfer of training to the job (Georgenson, 1982).

***“Yes, if you don’t learn you don’t know what to do. I feel I provide a better service to the people I care for [following training].”***

- Workplace learning is associated with improved workforce performance by enabling employees to work more efficiently, or provide an improved quality of service.

***“Obviously it’s made things that are complicated uncomplicated for me, plus it’s saved the company time as I’ve been able to pinpoint problems straight away, or at least in a shorter timescale. It’s definitely benefited me and the firm I think.”***

- Levels of job satisfaction and employee motivation are influenced by a range of factors, including improved terms and conditions, and empowerment and control, as well as the opportunity to learn at work, but opportunities for workplace learning do play a significant role in employees' job satisfaction and motivation.
- Organisations all had good practice which was recognised by employees, including through provision of top-class learning facilities in some organisations which had encouraged even reluctant learners to take the plunge. For example, the on-site learning centre at the Nestlé plant in Halifax was particularly successful in raising demand for learning.

***“If you learn at work, and I don’t want this to sound awful, but I wouldn’t feel intimidated here with the people that I work with, but if I went to college I’d feel intimidated with people I don’t know. That’s why I enjoy the courses here, because everyone is on the same level. We are all the same.”***

***“It is most important that we, as the largest employer in the Borough, support the Equal Project so that we can promote learning and gain the benefits of that learning both for our staff and for the Council.”***

*Peter MacLeod - Director, Dept of Environmental and Operational Services, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council*

***“One of our top priorities in Fleet and Waste Management is to build a learning culture and to encourage staff development. The Equal Project is one of a number of initiatives we are currently undertaking to achieve this goal in our organisation. The importance of learning for all our staff cannot be overstated.”***

*Richard Wixey - Director of Environmental Protection and Waste Management, Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council*

***“As an Investor in People, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council is committed to supporting its staff and offering them all opportunities for learning and development. We are keenly aware that, despite our successes, we still have some of the poorest levels of basic skills in the country, and that these issues affect many employed in the Council workforce. This is one of the reasons why the Council committed itself to become part of the Campaign for Learning's Equal Action Research project. The findings of the project have highlighted existing good practice, and through the evidence of specific examples of what is known to work well, encouraged the sharing of this Council-wide. They have also made recommendations for practical, immediate actions to improve the way we deliver our workforce development. I believe that the findings of this project, underpinned by our Workforce Development Plan, will set a framework for our activity to transform Blackburn with Darwen into a High Performance Learning Community.”***

*Donna Hall - Executive Director: Corporate Resources - Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council*

