

Skills in Focus

Skills Utilisation in Scotland

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About Skills in Focus

The Skills in Focus series is intended to support informed debate around current and future skills issues. The Skills Committee is jointly sponsored by the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland. The Committee works closely with the Scottish Government, employers, business organisations and students to ensure that Scotland has the right high-level skills and an employable and adaptive workforce.

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Introduction



Paul McKelvie OBE is Vice Chair of the Board of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), a member of the Board of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Scotland Commissioner to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. He is also the Chair of the Skills Committee.

The Skills Committee is a statutory committee of the Funding Council. It operates as a joint committee advising the Boards of SFC and SDS on skills policy. The Committee also has a central role in stimulating debate about skills issues in Scotland. The Skills in Focus seminar series is part of the Skills Committee's contribution to that debate.

Foreword

Professors Chris Warhurst and Patricia Findlay are acknowledged experts in skills systems. In this Skills in Focus, they turn their attention to the thorny issue of skills utilisation.

They summarise the policy trajectory from a simple faith in the supply of skills to the more nuanced debate around skills utilisation. They also highlight the debate and activities in other countries – notably Germany, Sweden, Finland and Australia.

Chris and Patricia identify five key areas for debate:

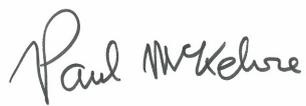
1. The need for conceptual clarity – what do we mean by skills utilisation and what does this mean to employers?
2. The causal chain – what are the links between business development, organisational development and the use of workforce skills within the workplace?
3. The policy to practice gap – how do we identify policies which are pragmatic?
4. Developing the evidence base – what do we know? What do we need to know?
5. Involving a broader stakeholder group – who needs to be involved to make it work?

I would like to thank Chris and Patricia for their contribution to the debate on skills utilisation in Scotland. Their insights are valuable in a number of respects – the need to identify a common language in this area to underpin discussions with employers, recognising the importance of organisational and business development in driving skills utilisation and examining ways to bridge any policy to practice gaps.

As Chris and Patricia rightly state, our debate has moved on from the previous focus on stimulating the supply of skills to encompass a wider perspective. And they have suggested the importance of concerted and collective action, through their ASPIRRE approach, in

capitalising on the untapped potential in many Scottish workplaces.

Their work will, I trust, provide much food for thought.



Paul McKelvie OBE

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The views expressed in Skills in Focus are those of the author(s). They need not represent the views of the Skills Committee, its members or constituent organisations.

Introduction

Across the UK, skills have been seen as the answer to a range of social and economic problems in recent years (Keep and Mayhew 2010). Quoting the Leitch Review of Skills 2006, Keep and Mayhew note that ‘where skills were once a key driver of prosperity and fairness, they are now the key driver’ (2010: 566). Even as recession has taken hold, it remains widely believed that skills – or more specifically qualifications – will provide a key route out of recession and deliver sustainable economic growth (BIS 2010).

There are both narrow and broad economic objectives behind the rationale for skills investment. Narrowly, investment in skills has often been seen as integral to increasing Scotland’s productivity which has consistently lagged behind that of competitor nations. In a broader sense, investment in a skilled workforce has been regarded as the principal lever to move Scotland up the value chain to become a high-skilled, high value added economy.

However, in his analysis of Scottish jobs, Felstead (2007: 8) concludes that whilst ‘the education system has been successful in increasing the qualification level of the economically active population, the demands of the economy have not kept pace with this success’. This development is not unique to Scotland but occurs both across the UK (Felstead et al 2007) and outwith the UK, in Australia for example (Skills Australia 2009),

with as much as 40% of workforces having more skills than are required.

By 2007 there was clear recognition in Scotland that focusing on supply-side interventions was too narrow and had to be widened to encompass demand and utilisation. The Scottish Government’s Skills Strategy for Scotland 2007 was clearly a repositioning of policy to emphasise not only the supply of skills but their demand and use. In particular, this gave rise to an interest in skills utilisation. To deliver more effective skills utilisation, however, may require that policy shift yet further. This paper examines skills utilisation, aiming to identify better ways of linking policy with practice and suggest a new approach to delivering more effective skills utilisation.

The policy context

In the late 1990s, skills policy focused largely on interventions in the supply side of the labour market. Accordingly, the Scottish government adopted an ‘active labour market policy’ (Scottish Executive 2001: 5) boosting education and training. Underpinning this supply-side intervention is an assumed causal chain – from workforce development based on increasing workers’ skills through organisational development that provides more highly skilled jobs to business development and to a more productive economy. Supply-side intervention in the labour market also avoided the political and

For a fuller description of Active Labour Market Policies see Hirst (2011)

operational challenges of more direct government intervention in the management of firms. As Layard (1997) put it prosaically, government intervenes in the supply-side of the labour market because it can.

Unfortunately, this supply-side solution hasn't had the desired effect, despite the real and pressing need for change in firms facing intensifying competition in terms of rising product specification standards and low cost competition in global markets (SSDA 2007).

Before long, policy thinking began to take on board what some academics had long argued: that raising workforce skill levels is important but not sufficient if innovation, productivity and competitiveness are to be improved (e.g. Keep and Mayhew 1996, Warhurst and Thompson 1999). As a consequence, the new policy focus incorporated the demand for skills and their usage, as well as their supply (Scottish Government 2007). This reflected the view that 'Our problem is not ... the supply of skills but ... employer demand for skills and how these skills are utilised in the workplace' (Hyslop, Scottish Parliament 2007). Consequently finding ways to enhance the use of the skills already possessed by many Scottish workers now dominates policy thinking in Scotland (e.g. Scottish Government 2007, Skills Utilisation Action Group 2009).

It is the pursuit of profit and threats to that profit that typically drives innovation in the private sector. Skills are often a third or even fourth order issue for employers. It is business development that is the predominant driver of change and so the first order priority for

employers, which in turn levers the second order priority of organisational development, which in turn levers workforce development, including skills development; a reversal in the direction of change causality to that which previously underpinned an emphasis on skills supply.

That workforce development strategies need to be aligned to organisational and business development strategies is now increasingly recognised in Scotland: 'Scotland must have a clear strategy to support workforce development and to encourage employers to view workforce development as an integral component of businesses growth' (ASSC 2010: 4). Effective skill utilisation is the bridge between these two strategies and has empirical support. Evidence from Australia shows that better skill utilisation requires a shift in emphasis from increasing the supply of workers with more and better qualifications to the encouragement of organisational development that creates decent work and more innovative firms (Buchanan et al. 2009). As a consequence, stimulating better skills utilisation has become a priority in Scotland and the UK, with developments in Scotland leading this policy shift.

Notwithstanding the policy shift, UKCES (2009) acknowledges that there is still a gap between policy intentions and employer ambition – the 'policy to practice gap' – and also a 'measurement gap' in which better measures are needed of attainment. We agree that both of these gaps require attention but further contend that discussions of skills utilisation to date have been

weakened, both in intellectual and policy terms, by additional conceptual and practical limitations. These limitations are the focus for the next section of this paper.

Skills utilisation policy in practice

While under-utilising the skills of their workers may not present employers with immediate problems, it does represent a missed opportunity for business and for society. Improving skills utilisation can provide immediate benefits through decreasing skills shortages and gaps, easing recruitment and retention difficulties (Scottish Government 2011; Skills Australia 2012; UKCES 2010c). By contrast, jobs in which skills are under-utilised are demotivating, alienating, lessen job satisfaction and lower levels of well-being (Green et al. 2010; Helliwell and Huang 2010). There may be additional longer-term benefits for employers: productivity gains (Flood et al. 2008) and, importantly, the possibility of incremental process and product innovations (Toner 2009). This latter possibility can also increase skill levels within firms and boost employment (Leigh and Gifford 1999).

We have identified five key areas for deliberation and further development as a first step to enhancing our wider understanding of skills utilisation. These are:

1. The need for conceptual clarity – do we agree what skills utilisation actually means?
2. The causal chain – can this chain ever be supply-driven?

3. The policy to practice gap – how do we identify policies which are pragmatic?
4. Developing the evidence base – what do we know? What do we need to know?
5. Involving a broader stakeholder group – who needs to be involved to make it work?

The need for conceptual clarity

The evidence base on skills utilisation is relatively sparse. In part, this scarcity reflects a lack of conceptual clarity over what skills utilisation actually means.

In the absence of a clear specification of what constitutes and how to measure skills utilisation, much of the research base focuses on a proxy measure: the use of high performance working (HPW) (SQW Consulting 2010). This emphasis seemingly offers a neat aspirational (and also inspirational) benchmark of better workplaces and a target to direct efforts centred on improving skills use (UKCES 2010b). Whilst there is overlap between some of the organisational and work practices associated with effective skills utilisation and HPW, and while HPW may facilitate skills utilisation, the use of HPW as a proxy for skills utilisation is limiting. First, take-up of HPW amongst UK firms is not high; it tends to be more topical than typical. Whilst some HPW practices might be adopted by some firms, few firms have anything that might be loosely accepted as a HPW system. Second, although assessment of HPW practices note the existence of upskilling, skill utilisation per se is not examined. Finally,

there is little consensus about the definition of HPW practices. Its use therefore only exacerbates problems of definition.

We suggest that effective skills utilisation refers to a matching of the skills possessed by workers (P) and the skills needed to do the job (J). For simplicity, the relationship between employees' skill and jobs can take three forms. Where $P=J$, employees' skills are effectively matched to the requirement of jobs i.e. utilised effectively. Where $P<J$, employees lack the skills to perform their job appropriately. Where $P>J$, the skills of employees are under-utilised. These positions are static. In terms of remedial action, $P<J$ means that use of better skills is required and so skill acquisition, or upskilling, needed on the part of workers. $P>J$ means that firms need to make better use of skills workers already possess. Both actions achieve $P=J$, in other words, effective skills utilisation. However the two actions have different policy resonances. Better use of skills focuses on doing a job better; use of better skills focuses on doing a better – that is, higher skilled – job. Using better skills involves upskilling and so movement towards the high skill economy desired by government. Firms making better use of skills addresses the untapped potential of workers and levers the existing sunk costs in skills acquisition. Whilst both are important, it is the better use of skills (or rather the lack of this use) that drives the current concern with skill utilisation.

Using this definition, the HPW literature does have some merit. Drawing on Appelbaum et al's (2000) work on how employees' discretionary behaviour can be harnessed to

business outcomes, effective skills utilisation can be conceptualised in terms of aligning ability, motivation and opportunity: while skill supply can address the employee's ability, employers must provide the opportunity for the effective deployment of employee skills and the conditions in which the employee is sufficiently motivated to deploy their skills. The focus on employers by the Scottish Government Skills Utilisation Group is thus well placed in its emphasis on employers and their policies.

From the discussion above, it is clear that achieving some conceptual clarity in what constitutes skills utilisation is a necessary first step in measuring skills utilisation and in beginning to develop an appropriate evidence base.

The causal chain

The previous policy emphasis on enhancing the supply of skills implicitly assumed that skills enhancement could lever organisational development and new business strategies. More recent debates on skills utilisation put emphasis on organisational development. Yet this new focus may not go far enough. The core policy problem arises from low value business strategies and hence encouraging firms to reposition themselves in different market segments is the first order consideration, only then followed by organisational development that in turn triggers workforce development. While organisational change does not occur in tidy sequence, a failure to recognise skills utilisation and skills as third order considerations risks loading onto the

shoulders of skills utilisation the same burden as has previously been carried by supply-side skills interventions.

The policy to practice gap

However making more effective use of existing workers' skills in Scotland does require engaging employers and opening up the black box of firms to examine work design, management and leadership (all features of organisational development) as well as business strategies (CfE 2007; for a similar argument for the UK see Keep and Mayhew 2010) and which, in Scotland at least, should also be sensitive to industry-specificity (Ashton & Sung 2011). Yet content with their existing operations, many employers have little incentive to open this box, 'not because they haven't seen the "light" but simply because it doesn't make economic sense for them to do so' (CfE 2007: 16). There is no employer penalty for under-utilising employees (Skills for Business 2007) and incentives to use skills effectively or upskill jobs may be difficult to discern in the short term.

For workers, having more and better qualifications is beneficial in Scotland – at an aggregate level qualifications improve the chances of being employed and increase income when in employment (Walker and Zhu 2007). Yet the experience of jobs in which skills are under-utilised is demotivating, and employees have much to gain from the opportunity to deploy their skills at work. Driving up skill levels across all industries and stimulating higher value added product market strategies amongst firms is also a key

priority of government and should generate benefits in terms of national competitiveness (ies 2010).

For policymakers, there are three broad options for intervention:

1. Regulatory pressure – the Government can place a statutory duty on employers through measures such as licences to practise. However, this approach can be a very blunt instrument and may not improve the deployment of 'licenced' skills. In any event, there is little political appetite to adopt such measures more widely.
2. Market pressure – employers may respond to market pressures such as increased competition, or recruitment and retention challenges. But such signals are not always clear and they require interpretation by management. Moreover the link from interpretation of market pressures to an appropriate skills response is not always clear-cut.
3. Persuasion – policymakers can attempt to persuade (or exhort) employers to improve the skills levels of their jobs and/or to make better use of their employees existing skills.

In respect to this last option, one difficulty engaging with employers is that many do not recognise the concept or term 'skills utilisation' (SQW, 2010). This lack of clarity is not limited to employers. There is a widespread lack of conceptual clarity on the meaning of skills utilisation and a general

shortage of research in effective skills utilisation (Scottish Government 2008b; Buchanan et al. 2010)

Developing the evidence base

The development of policy and practice in relation to skills utilisation needs to be underpinned by analysis of existing good practice. Yet as the Scottish Government acknowledge, there is very little research in the UK or in Scotland on effective skills utilisation (Scottish Government 2008b). This situation is not peculiar to Scotland. As Buchanan et al. (2010) note in a general review, literature on the subject is 'patchy and disparate' (p.2). In large part, this gap in understanding stems from a lack of any common method for measuring skill utilisation and its improvement. It is not clear, for example, what type of skills are to be examined and there is little data collection, particularly at workplace level, on skill utilisation. As this data collection can be difficult and expensive – and should encompass data from both employers and employees, examples of good skill utilisation are rare (cf. Skills Australia 2012).

Scotland does, however, have good examples of efforts to improve skills utilisation. The interim evaluation of the SFC skills utilisation projects has established proof of concept, suggesting that the programme could contribute to a broader approach to skills and innovation policy in Scotland (Payne, 2011). SCER and STUC have co-operated in supporting and evaluating case studies of effective skills utilisation in the private and public sector (Findlay et al., 2011).

Notwithstanding these and other examples, the skills utilisation agenda requires a stronger evidence base than exists currently. Establishing such an evidence base presents distinctive challenges beyond resolving the conceptual differences discussed earlier. A key task has to be the building of a critical mass of researchers with expertise in skill issues able and willing to undertake action research to support practitioners and government to improve skill usage in the workplace (Payne 2010).

Involving a broader stakeholder group

Discussions of skills utilisation have focused, predictably, on employers as the key target of intervention. Notwithstanding the limits to stimulating employers' voluntary engagement in skills developments, UKCES has recently emphasised the potential of collective measures to support employers in skills development and to engage them in workplace/organisational development through high performance working. Employer networks have been singled out as having the greatest potential benefit. Employers may well learn from each other through collective engagement with skills issues amongst others (Edwards 2007) and thus an emphasis on employers collectively may have some potential. But it is as yet untested and there may be good reason for scepticism in expecting employers to do collectively what they have not done individually, particularly in the absence of immediate incentives to change their practice.

Employers are undoubtedly key actors in relation to skill deployment in the workplace but they are not the only actors. As such there is much potential in shifting from an approach based on a narrow reading of collective measures as promulgated by UKCES to an approach based on collective interest which aligns employer, employee, state and academic interests in working together to pursue workforce, organisational and business development. Outwith the UK, a number of examples highlight the potential of such collective measures, more broadly defined, to support organisational and business development. Perhaps the most well-known is the skills eco-system approach adopted in Australia, focused on improving and re-aligning these skill ecosystems at the industry/regional level. Other examples include the 'Better not Cheaper' campaign driven by German trade union IG Metall; collaborative competency programmes in Sweden and partnership working between employers, unions and academics in Scotland to improve skills supply and utilisation. However, there are no long-term evaluations of these initiatives, and the importance of skill eco-systems and of how particular skill eco-systems can both lever and impede good skill utilisation remains under-appreciated by government (Buchanan et al. 2010).

These examples are useful however and resonate strongly with Ramstad's (2009) work on how innovation is best levered in Finnish workplaces. She points out that workplace innovation is supported by concept agreement, systemic tools, project funding

and political (government) and social partners' (employers and trade unions) support. It must also involve a co-ordinated formal and informal network of colleges and universities, research institutes, consultancies, firms, labour market organisations and policy bodies.

Challenges ahead

Unfortunately, it is not clear what employers are being exhorted to do. Skills utilisation is not well-recognised amongst, or understood by, employers. Employers in the SQW Consulting (2010) case studies in Scotland did not recognise the term skills utilisation. If employers have difficulty knowing what it is, it is obvious that they will then have difficulty engaging with it as government policy and adopting it as workplace practice.

We have shown that it is possible to define effective skill utilisation, identify its within-organisation requirements and the broader measures for its support. Perhaps it is time, therefore, for an explicit acknowledgement that what happens inside firms matters. Whilst direct intervention by government inside this 'black box' may be neither feasible nor desirable, there is a role for government in establishing the infrastructure necessary for a broad-based approach to innovation as suggested by Ramstad (2009). Once established this system allows the building up of expertise in effective skills utilisation advocated by Payne (2010), the exchange of experience and thereby benchmarking within and between industries (Sung et al. 2009) and

For a discussion of the 'Better not Cheaper campaign', see Warhurst and Findlay 2012. See <http://www.scottishunionlearning.com/support/skills-utilisation-project>.

within and between countries (Carré and Tilly 2012).

This alignment of interests will not happen spontaneously – it requires deliberate encouragement. Adapting Ramstad’s approach, what is needed is an approach that envelops actors, structures, protocols, responsibilities, resources and expertise – what we call ASPIRRE. It covers who does what, when, how and why in delivering more effective skill utilisation. Such an approach represents what Payne (2010) has suggested is needed in Scotland in terms of developing not just good research but also good evaluation of skills utilisation projects: action research that is case study focused in which academics, appropriately incentivised, engage in applied research with government and practitioners to broker and solve business problems. The prize for government in adopting ASPIRRE is an opportunity to tap the potential in Scottish workplaces and encouraged sustainable change in how skills are utilised.

The shift in Scottish policy thinking on skills in recent years is to be welcomed, but policy thinking may have to shift yet further if effective skills utilisation is to be achieved.

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