Promising approaches to training in the United States and United Kingdom

Learning and Active Employment Programs Project

Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been significant innovation in the design and delivery of employment training programs, especially to those targeted to adults with low skill levels. Broadly speaking, innovations in employment training for low-skilled adults have shifted from an "individual-based" approach — where training is typically more general and tries to give students a range of skills that can be used in different jobs — to one more focused on employer needs. This second approach sacrifices some of the generality in individual-based training to improve the fit of skills to specific jobs. There is also increased attention to building career ladders, with a focus on providing training that helps individuals to secure decent paying, higher-quality jobs. These initiatives focus on making training more accessible to working-age adults in terms of curriculum and linking skill-upgrade programs directly to employment and advancement opportunities. Many of these approaches have been observed in international programs.

This report provides a summary of findings from a consultation exercise on those promising practices in training for lower skilled adults in the United States and the United Kingdom. These international consultations represent one component of a larger study, the Learning and Active Employment Program project (LAEP), whose overall goal is to develop options for testing innovative training interventions for lower skilled unemployed Canadian adults. The first phase of this project involved a review of existing evaluations and research studies to identify knowledge gaps and promising approaches focusing on several of these innovations in the design and delivery of employment training programs, especially with respect to programs targeted to adults with low skill levels.

For the next phase of the project — the subject of this report — a series of depth interviews have been conducted with international experts, program administrators and instructors (largely US and UK-based) associated with the design and delivery of education and training programs that exemplify these innovative practices. The goal is to explore these innovative approaches in richer detail in an attempt to understand the critical success factors, which may be important to the potential implementation of such practices in a Canadian setting. In the final phase of the study — the Canadian fieldwork consultations — we will seek to explore the relevance and potential capacity for the implementation of these approaches in Canadian jurisdictions.

The previous report identified three broad categories of promising approaches which we further refined to create five categories: Workforce Intermediaries, Sectoral Approaches, Embedded Career Exploration, Bridge Training, and Career Pathways Initiatives. Figure 1 provides a high-level overview of these five categories.

Figure 1 Five approaches to training for adults with low education and/or skills

Our US consultations focused on three of the five categories: Sectoral Approaches, Bridge Training, and Career Pathways Initiatives. The first category, Workforce Intermediaries was dropped from this part of the analysis because although, workforce intermediaries are key players in workforce development systems, they are typically more involved in the coordination of employment services and tend not to be involved in the actual design and delivery of training. The third category, Embedded Career Exploration, was not included because the most prominent example we could find was a Canadian example and as such will be included in the next phase of the project.

In addition to these three categories of promising approaches we also examined *Skills for Life* (*SfL*) which is an ambitious UK-wide strategy to ensure individuals have the skills that they need to access jobs and learning opportunities, and to fully take part in civil society. The literature review compiled detailed information on this strategy. This phase of the project will explore the broader policy and program landscape in the UK to provide a better understanding of the comparability and relevance of *SfL* to Canadian and American approaches to skills development and training. Another related purpose of the UK consultations was to elicit information to help us organize and synthesize the information we had gathered on this very large, comprehensive strategy. As such, our UK consultations had the following three objectives: 1) to understand the policy and program environment for *SfL* (i.e., comparability to the Canadian context); 2) to learn more how *SfL* worked – its rationale, operations, target populations, evaluation, etc.; and 3) to discover the extent to which *SfL* programs exhibited characteristics previously identified as innovative, such as sectoral approaches, embedded learning/bridge programs, and pathways-type approaches.

2. Methodology for the consultations

2.1 US program and site selections

To select consultation sites, we identified programs within each of the three categories of promising approaches that were:

- Frequently cited in the literature as innovative programs
- State-wide in reach or at least with multiple sites
- Cited as a prototypical or influential program by at least one other jurisdiction that had subsequently implemented a similar program
- Associated with some evidence of effectiveness *or* at least some indicators of a "promising approach"
- Located in a jurisdiction that has also implemented other types of promising approaches (therefore making the jurisdiction particularly relevant to the LAEP research project).

Using these criteria we created a short list of programs in each category and then using this short list we created a final list of programs and program sites. What follows below is a brief description of each program:

- **Bridge programs** – Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program is probably the most well-established Bridge program in North America and is cited as a prototype by administrators of bridge program in several other jurisdictions. I - BEST began as a demonstration project with ten sites with strong initial results. Students in the pilots earned five times more college credits and were 15 times more likely to complete a workforce education program than other adult learners with the same goals (Jenkins & Prince, 2005). There are now over 70 I-BEST programs in Washington State. A recent report found that in 2006-07, adult basic education student participation in college-level programs has jumped 33 percent since I-BEST began (Prince, 2008). The three program sites were selected based on the recommendations of the I-BEST state-wide program coordinators.
- **Career Pathways Initiatives –** Oregon has a state-wide Pathways initiative that began in 2004 with five colleges. By 2009, the initiative included all colleges in the state. Oregon has a reputation as a leader in the field and has provided technical assistance to several jurisdictions that have since launched similar initiatives. Portland Community College (a large college with 85,000 students) was selected as the consultation site based on the recommendations of the Oregon state-wide Career Pathway's coordinator.
- **Sectoral approaches –** The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) is an association of employers and unions that designs and delivers training using a sectoral approach. The WRTP was part of a rigorous random assignment demonstration project conducted by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) that showed that well-designed sectoral training programs can make a difference for disadvantaged workers and job seekers. An additional reason for selecting the WRTP is that Wisconsin is also in the

process of implementing bridge and career pathways initiatives making it a particularly interesting jurisdiction to study.

2.2 US interview protocol

For each program we conducted in-depth face-to-face or telephone interviews with program administrators and instructors, government officials and academic researchers and other experts. The focus of the in-depth interviews was on better understanding how the particular programs designs and delivers training for adults with low education and/or skills who are in need of training to help them secure a decent paying job. For each program, interview participants were asked three broad questions. How does the program:

1. Improve access to occupational training for adults with low basic skills?
2. Make occupational training more responsive to the learning needs of working age adults?
3. Align employment services with education and training programs to provide more effective service delivery to unemployed adults?

2.3 UK program and site selection

The focus for the UK consultations was the National Strategy for Adult Basic Skills, known as *Skills for Life* (*SfL*). We conducted in-depth telephone interviews with four experts knowledgeable about this initiative by virtue of their roles in research and evaluation, policy and program development, or program administration and delivery. Our sample of interviewees was determined by a combination of personal referral (we asked each interviewee to suggest other appropriate contacts) and "cold calls" to organizations which background research indicated were relevant. Not all of these attempts at contact were successful; individuals at two organizations did not respond to our requests for follow-up. Fortunately, those whom we interviewed were individuals associated with the two key UK organisations likely most knowledgeable of the *SfL* initiative:

- The **Institute for Employment Studies** (IES) has become the UK's leading independent (non-profit) centre for research and evidence-based consultancy in employment, labour market and human resource policy and practice.[1] As such, our two contacts at IES were well positioned to provide the required background information on the policy and program environment for *SfL*. Moreover, since IES has conducted evaluations of several *SfL* programmes, they were also able to describe some of the key features of these programs and their critical success factors.
- **Tribal Education Ltd** is a private sector company providing consultancy, professional support and delivery services to the education and skills sector, and is closely associated with the *SfL* strategy. Tribal advises the UK government, regional and local authorities and national organisations on programmes and policy implementation to raise achievement levels of adults in basic skills. It also manages projects to deliver the basic skills strategy, provides training and inspection services related

[1] Taken from http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/ies/index.php.

to skills training and education, and develops and publishes learning materials and resources for *SfL* and other educational programmes.[2]

In fact, one of our interviewees from **Tribal** is considered one of the "architects" of *SfL*, and has the added advantage of having worked on the development of the National Qualifications Framework prior to developing *SfL*, and subsequently, on the Functional Skills framework that builds on and incorporates *SfL*. As such, this person was uniquely positioned to provide valuable information about the original goals and early development of *SfL*, as well as its perceived shortcomings and evolution.

[2] Adapted from http://www.tribalgroup.com/servicesandsectors/Pages/education.aspx.

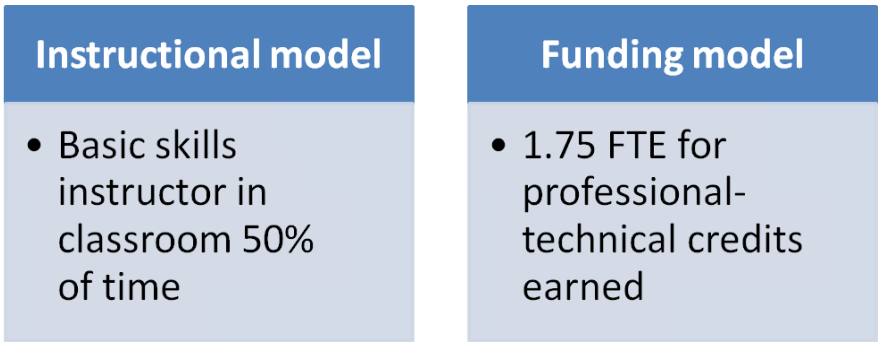
3. Bridge programs — I-BEST, Washington State

3.1 The I-BEST approach

Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) was developed in response to research conducted by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges SBCTC that indicated that only a very small proportion of low skilled individuals who enrolled in basic skills programs successfully make the transition to college level occupational diploma programs. This was of considerable concern to policy makers given that the same study also found that for low skilled learners, the "tipping point" for adult learning to be associated with a significant earnings gain was at least *one full year of college credits plus a credential*. Moreover this "tipping point" represented the same mid-level skills and credentials that employers were finding in short supply. In response to this study, the State set out to re-align its policies to encourage more low-skilled adults to reach the "tipping point" and obtain a college credential.

A cornerstone of this re-alignment was the I-BEST program which represented a fundamental shift in the way adult basic skills training was delivered. I-BEST integrates basic education and occupational training by pairing ABE or ESL instructors. Basic skills training is embedded in the occupational training which provides a "bridge" to post-secondary education for low-skilled adults who are not "college-ready." The I-BEST approach allows low-skilled learners to earn college level credits toward an occupational certificate *at the same time* as they are improving their basic skills. In addition, I-BEST provides a higher level of wrap-around supports to address the often complex needs of non-traditional students. The major innovation of the I-BEST is that it challenges the traditional notion that students must first complete adult basic education or ESL before moving to college level course work.

Figure 2 Core components of the I-BEST instructional and funding models



3.2 I-BEST implementation

I-BEST began as a pilot program at 10 community and technical colleges and is now operating in all 34 colleges in the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) system. There are currently more than 140 approved programs. I-BEST has expanded each year since its 2006 launch. In 2009, 2,795 students were served representing a one-year increase of 58 per cent.

I-BEST career fields include: Architecture/Engineering, Automotive/Engine Repair, Commercial Driver's License and Transportation, Corrections/Law Enforcement, Early Childhood Education/Childcare, Healthcare Manufacturing/Trades, Office Support/Technology. The most common fields are Health Care and Office Support/Technology.

A major finding of the consultations is that there is no "typical" program but rather a set of principles and practices. Box 1 provides an overview of key program guidelines.

Box 1 Selected I-BEST program guidelines

- **Approval process –** Each I-BEST program must go through a specific integrated program approval process, which includes sign-off at the college level by both workforce and basic skills administrators.
- **In-demand occupations –** The proposal provides evidence of local and regional labour market demand in the industry including evidence of the gap between the number of program graduates/completers versus the number of job openings locally and regionally.
- **Partnerships –** Proposal shows evidence that local and regional businesses, labour, WDC, and community based organizations are active in supporting the college's effort to begin or expand this program (partners are to be listed in the proposal).
- **Co-instruction** – During a quarter, an instructor from basic skills and an instructor from the professional-technical program must jointly instruct in the same classroom with at least a 50 percent overlap of the instructional time.
- **Embedded instruction** – The expectation for educational delivery is that the mode of instruction incorporates joint ABE/ESL and professional-technical faculty planning and instructing together in the classroom, resulting in both literacy and workforce skills gains.
- **Skills assessment –** Students must be pre-tested using either the CASAS ECS or Life and Work series at the start of the I-BEST program and must be post-tested upon program completion, or at the end of the academic year, whichever occurs first.
- **College credits –** I-BEST programs must include some college-level professional-technical credits.
- **Evaluation** – Student progress is to be evaluated jointly by ABE/ESL and professional-technical faculty, and program effectiveness is to be evaluated jointly by all involved faculty and administrators.

Source: http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_integratedbasiceducationandskillstraining.aspx.

3.3 Promising outcomes

In 2007, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) launched the Student Achievement Initiative aimed at increasing academic achievement for all students, regardless

of their program or starting level by measuring student progress for the important incremental gains they make that lead to college success. The goal is to help more students reach the "tipping point" or beyond. These measures, called momentum points because their attainment can propel students forward, are in four categories: improving preparation for college-level courses, building towards a year of college credit, completing college math, and completing certificates, degrees and apprenticeships. A full description of the initiative is available at: http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_studentachievement.aspx. The State Board Student Achievement Initiative provides a means to measure incremental progress in student achievement and provide evidence for developing and improving practices. Previously, the community and technical college system did not have a consistent way to quantitatively evaluate promising practices. The Student Achievement Initiative provides a common measurement through the momentum points, which can be used to measure results in a uniform way.

The Community College Research Center (Jenkins, 2009) recently conducted an evaluation of I-BEST using longitudinal data and matching methods. The study found that students participating in I-BEST did better than other basic skills students. I-BEST students were more likely than others to:

- Make point gains on basic skills tests
- Earn credits that counted towards a college credential
- Earn a college certificate

However because the study was not able to control for unobserved differences between students who participate in I-BEST versus students who participate in traditional basic skills programs, the study is not able to definitively conclude that it was the I-BEST program that *caused* better outcomes. Study authors note that "selection-bias" could be driving results either up or down depending on whether I-BEST students are more able or less able than students enrolled in traditional programs. Qualitative research is currently underway to learn about how students are "selected" into I-BEST programs. According to the lead researcher of this new research, this qualitative research could lay the groundwork for a random assignment experiment that would isolate the causal impact of I-BEST.

A further issue is that little is known about which program features or student characteristics drive program success. A study is currently underway to identify the structures and supports that are most effective in enabling low-income young adults to complete credentials and obtain employment. This study will test the hypothesis that more structured and focused programs that provide students with a more directed curriculum and proactive student supports lead to better outcomes for students who are not well-prepared for college-level work. The Community College Research Center will develop and apply a protocol for measuring key dimensions of program "structure" and then use unit record data from the SBCTC to compare student outcomes between more- and less-structured programs.

3.4 Challenges and next steps

Our consultations identified two major challenges with the I-BEST program: cost and logistics. The I-BEST "embedded" instructional model requires a basic skills instructor in the classroom with the technical instructor at least 50 per cent of the time. Having co-instructors in the classroom is expensive compared to traditional models that deliver basic skills and occupational training separately. Having

co-instructors is also difficult from a logistical standpoint and can make class scheduling a challenge. An additional logistical challenge is that students do not necessarily progress at the same pace so there is not always full cohort of students ready to advance to the next step. In part because of these two challenges, only a small, albeit growing, proportion of basic skills students are enrolled in I-BEST programs. For example, at Bellingham Technical College about one sixth of basic skills students were enrolled in an I-BEST program in 2008-09. In addition to the new research initiatives described above a major next step for I-BEST programs is to better link these programs to pathways for further occupational education. While I-BEST programs provide a "bridge" to college entry, once students are in a college program they do not necessarily have access to an educational pathway that is responsive to the needs of working age adults. The Career Pathways approach described in the next section provides an example of how to build such an educational pathway.

4. Career Pathways – Oregon Career Pathways Initiative

4.1 The Career Pathways approach

Oregon's Career Pathways Initiative encourages community colleges to develop programs that re-align curriculum and provide flexible delivery methods to enable working age adults to gain skills and advance in the labour market. A major impetus for the first generation of career pathways programs in Oregon was to better serve unemployed adults who needed to train or re-train to secure employment. Early career pathways programs re-designed college occupational training to provide modular courses that would provide industry-recognized credential in shortest possible time but at the same time put individuals on an educational pathway that allowed them to return to further education as circumstances permit.

As local college Career Pathways programs become increasingly popular across Oregon, the state launched a state-wide Career Pathways initiative. This initiative responds more broadly to the finding that fewer students are using the community colleges as a link in a linear educational pipeline where they move from a high school diploma to a college diploma to work. More and more students are blending education and work or returning to school after periods of unemployment. Students frequently take only the classes they need to get a job, returning for more classes when they want a better job, and so on. Yet they are often unclear about which courses lead to which jobs. By modularizing the curriculum into sets of courses with discrete employment outcomes, students are able to enter and exit a degree or certificate program at specific points in the educational cycle rather than completing the entire program at once. Pathways also provide the "wrap around" student services that enhance student planning and informed decision making and increase student success in achieving both academic and employment goals.

From an instructional standpoint, career pathways are sector-specific career ladders linked to a sequence of modular educational opportunities connected to support services that enable individuals to get jobs in specific industries and advance to higher levels of education and work. The Career Pathway approach depends on both industries and educators looking at whether work and education can be organized into matching steps based on skill advancement. Employers in an industry or industry sector look at whether work can be organized into a clear, promotional ladder based on skill level and educators then design smaller, sequential chunks of learning that match those laddered jobs and present easier-to-attain educational goals for workers. Each step taken on the educational pathway should result in a reward in the work place, and each step taken should prepare and encourage the worker/student to take the next step. Each Career Pathway step should result in a credential that has meaning in the educational sphere and the employment sphere, at least across an industry in a region of the state.

In Oregon, all career pathways programs must provide visual roadmaps or templates depicting the coursework, competencies, skill requirements, and credentials needed for a series of related occupations in an industry sector. Figure 3 provides an example of a career pathways road map for an HVAC/R installer offered at Portland Community College. All career pathways road maps include career lattices that identify multiple entry and exits points and potential lateral and vertical movement within

an occupation or career cluster linked to occupational labour market data. Career pathways program guidelines ensure that roadmaps are "demand-driven" and collaboratively developed, fully engaging employers, faculty, advisors, educational administrators, workforce professionals, and labour representatives as appropriate.

A key feature of these road maps is that they explicitly show the connection between educational steps and actual job prospects in the region. Many road maps provide links to actual regional wage data. Maps are used by students, advisors, counsellors, parents, employers and public workforce development professionals. They assist students and workers as they navigate their pathway to better jobs and increased earnings. They provide employers with an organizational development tool to focus on career planning and development for their employees. The tools can also be: loaded onto websites; incorporated in college catalogues, high school career guides, and recruitment materials, and; used as a tool for career exploration and guidance as well as ongoing curriculum improvement in both secondary and postsecondary settings.

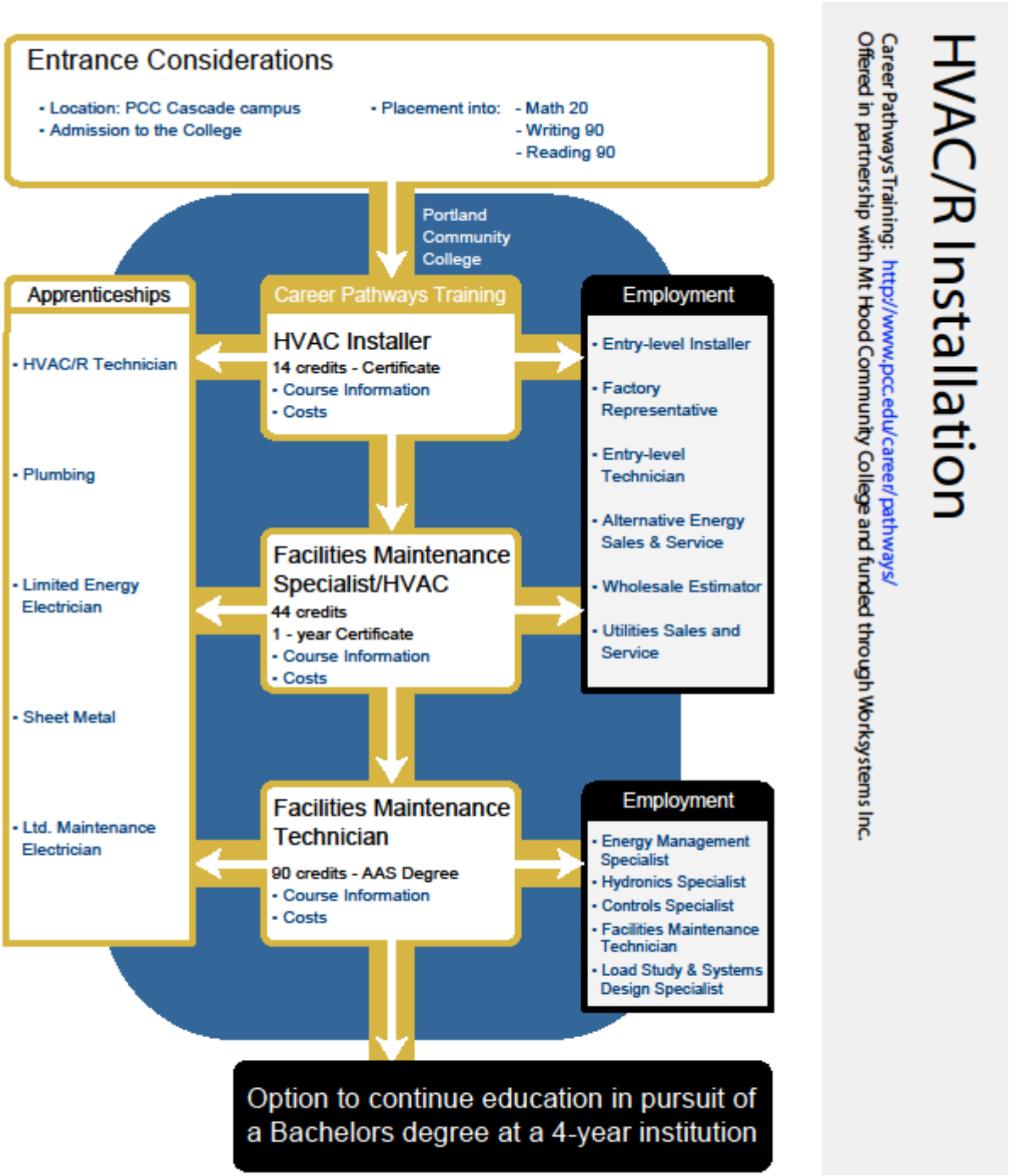
4.2 Implementation

The Career Pathways Initiative began in 2004 with five colleges and funding from Governor's Employer Workforce Fund and Oregon Workforce Investment Board. By 2009, all Oregon colleges have launched at least one career pathways program. A major signal that Oregon's Career Pathway's Initiative has matured is that many program areas within colleges are taking a career pathways approach on their own (without additional state funding) because they believe it is effective marketing and delivery approach. Another sign of maturity is that career pathways principles are embedded in policy frameworks for other related programs. For example, Oregon's Workforce Investment Board's new procurement framework for 2008 uses career pathways and worker advancement as guiding principles for all adult, dislocated and youth Workforce Investment Act services.

4.3 Outcomes

The career pathways approach is widely recognized as the leading approach to occupational training for adults across the United States. The approach is being studied, piloted, and implemented in several US states. There are numerous case study and anecdotal accounts as well as evidence of strong buy-in from college presidents in several jurisdictions, but there are no rigorous evaluations to date.

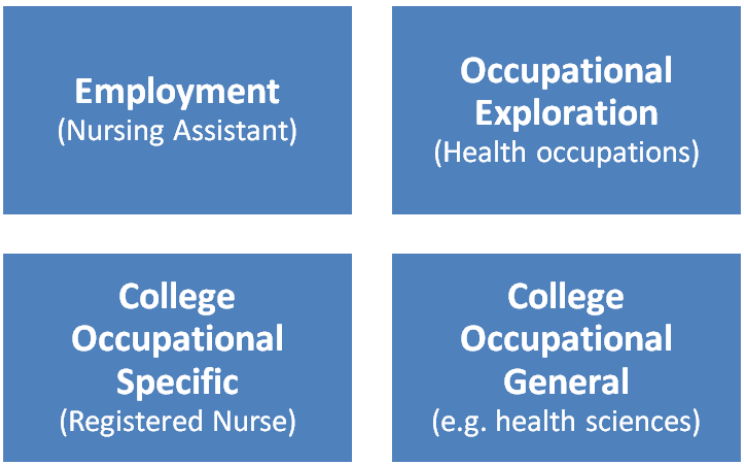
Figure 3 Example of a career pathways roadmap – HVAC/R Installation, Portland Community College, Oregon



4.4 Challenges and next steps

According to a review of several career pathways initiatives including Oregon's, a major challenge is that career pathways initiatives are still not accessible enough to individuals with lower skills/limited English. Many of the pathways programs in Oregon require a GED as the minimum entry requirement. Oregon is currently exploring models to better connect adults with low basic skills to career pathways. Oregon is using four broad models for delivering basic skills. Figure 4 provides an overview of these models.

Figure 4 Four models for delivering basic skills in an occupational context



The employment model provides basic skills learners with a direct bridge to employment in a specific occupation that does not require a college certificate. Nursing assistant is a common example. The occupational exploration model delivers basic skills training in the context of career exploration for a related set of occupations such as occupations in the health field. The college occupational model delivers basic skills training in the context of academic preparation for a related set of occupational programs such as health sciences. The occupation-specific model provides basic skills learners with a direct bridge to a college occupational program such as a registered nurse.

The Oregon Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development is exploring these models through the Pathways for Adult Basic Skills Transition to Education and Work Initiative (OPABS). Career occupational exploration and advising modules were pilot-tested in 2008 and college occupational modules were pilot tested in the following year.

5. Sectoral – Wisconsin regional training partnership

5.1 The sectoral approach

Although some workforce development initiatives focus on building relationships with individual employers, an increasingly common approach is a regionally-based sector-specific approach that brings together all employers in a specific industry. The objectives of sectoral initiatives include: organizing employers within a specific industry to address its workforce needs; and aligning educational opportunities with economic development objectives and providing training to help job-seekers access higher-skilled jobs.

An additional objective of some sectoral initiatives is to promote change on the demand-side of the equation by encouraging employers to adjust their production processes to take advantage of a more highly skilled local labour pool (Conway, Blair, Dawson, and Dworak-Munoz, 2007). The motivation for a demand-side focus is the recognition that in many industrial sectors, the demand for skill is affected by structural factors such as what Hall and Soskice (2001) call the *low-skill/low-wage equilibrium* in which employers compete on the basis of low cost and relatively low skill, standardized production strategies. Under the *low-skill/low-wage* scenario, even if sectoral training initiative successfully increases the skill levels of job-seekers, program participants may find that the only opportunities are insecure, low skill/low wage jobs. On the other hand, if sectoral initiatives are successful in convincing employers to adjust their production processes and raise wages as a result, program participants may be able to obtain jobs that are decent paying and more secure. Under the sectoral approach individuals receive education or training targeted toward local growing economic sectors, where labour demand is strong and well-paying jobs are available for those without four-year college degrees.

The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) is a non-profit association of businesses and unions that has served employers, employees, job seekers, and unions in the Milwaukee area since 1996. WRTP works in several industries including manufacturing, health care, construction, and hospitality. Firms that join WRTP agree to develop education and training programs on-site or at community colleges, and provide a payroll contribution. In return, they receive technical assistance to strengthen technology and workplace practices, to improve the skills of incumbent workers, and to recruit and train new workers.

5.2 Implementation

The WRTP includes over 100 employers with several thousand individuals participating. WRTP's member services include pre-employment training, incumbent worker training and performance improving consulting and technical assistance to businesses in areas such as new technology adoption. Individuals received short-term technical training in the industry sector of interest. Training typically ranges from one to four weeks for 40 to 160 hours and included an "essential skills" component to help participants with timeliness, attendance, strategies for dealing with childcare, workplace issues, and operating within the industry culture. To provide technical training, WRTP relies on a range of service providers, including member company employees who worked as trainers, community college

instructors, industry experts recommended by members and others. Student supports and remedial education are offered through a network of public and community-based agencies.

The PV/V study identified several key features of the WRTP:

- Regional and sectoral focus
- Concern for candidates' career match
- Integrated basic and occupational skills training
- Wrap-around services
- Only train for jobs that exist in local labour market
- Flexibility to adjust to a changing environment

5.3 Outcomes

WRTP's program is one of the few sectoral programs that has been rigorously evaluated with random assignment methodology. In 2003, based on promising earlier findings from two large-scale "process" evaluations of nine sectoral programs (Aspen Institute, 2003), Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), launched the Sectoral Employment Impact Study. This study was a rigorous random assignment evaluation that addressed the question of whether a well-implemented, sector-focused training program would make a difference to the earnings of low-income disadvantaged workers and job seekers. Through nominations from leaders in the workforce development field, P/PV identified organizations that had been operating workforce programs for at least three years, had well-implemented training that served more than 100 people each year and targeted an occupation or cluster of occupations with jobs that paid a decent wage.

The WRTP was one of three sites selected.[3] In total, 1,285 people were recruited across the three sites. Half were randomly selected to participate in the program; the remaining half were assigned to the control group and could not receive services from study sites for the next 24 months but were free to receive services from other employment programs. Impacts at the two year mark were measured by comparing the progress made by people in the treatment group with that made by those in the control group. While further analysis is still under way, several key findings have emerged. The study found that individuals who participated in programs at all three sites including WRTP, had significantly better employment and earnings outcomes than the control group of participants with similar characteristics.

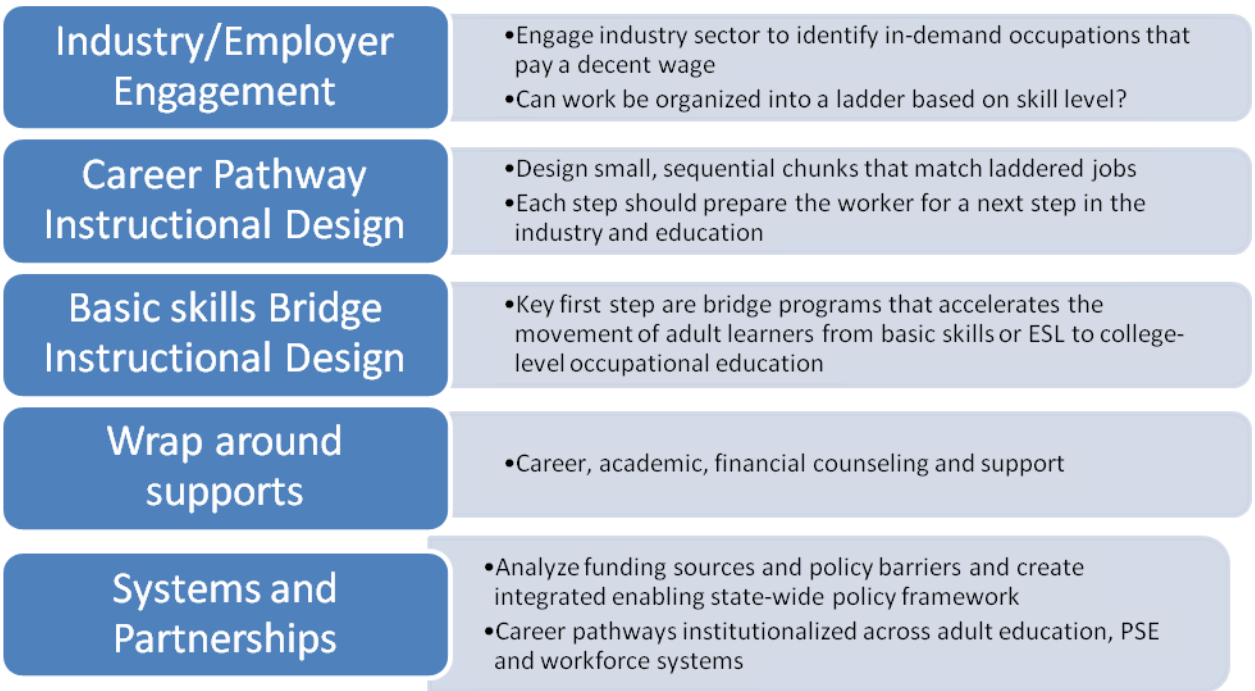
These findings suggest that training programs focused on industry-specific needs — with employers who are involved in the program's design and implementation — can produce positive outcomes for participants. In addition to providing training focused on specific industry needs, programs in this study integrated technical, work readiness and basic skills training and offered individual case management services when needed.

[3] The two other organizations that were selected were: Jewish Vocational Service, a community-based nonprofit in Boston and Per Scholas, a social venture in the Bronx in New York City.

5.4 Challenges/Next steps

Key partners in Wisconsin's workforce development, regional economic development and adult education system have recently joined together to launch the Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE) initiative. This initiative began with funding from the Joyce Foundation to explore how best to embed short-term postsecondary certificates into larger associate degree programs so that low-skilled adults have a manageable "landing point" in the education sequence that allows them to access productive, higher-paying employment. The goal was both to expand skilled work force and to help low income workers secure good jobs and careers by increasing the number of adults who earn PSE credentials in high demand occupations. In its first year, a cross-agency team of staff was created from the Department of Workforce Development, Wisconsin Technical College System (including adult education staff), University of Wisconsin Center on Wisconsin Strategy, and a leading Workforce Development board to identify local and state policy changes required to support this innovation. Oregon's Career Pathways initiative was a major influence for this initiative. The RISE has five core elements including a focus on providing bridges to occupational training for low skilled adults. In this respect RISE brings together all 3 types of promising approaches (sectoral, bridge, pathways) at the same time. Figure 5 provides an overview of these elements and Box 2 provides a more detailed summary.

Figure 5 Overview of core elements of Wisconsin's Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE)



Box 2 Summary of Wisconsin's Regional Industry Skills Education core elements

A. Industry engagement

1. A core group of employers from an industry sector is involved in developing and supporting the pathway.
2. Employers show there is a progression in compensation or job security for workers as skill levels expand, and they examine their patterns of organizing work and filling jobs to see if pathways can be built where none currently exist. Organized labour is involved as appropriate.
3. Employers participate in recruiting individuals to pursue career pathways education and commit to hiring, retaining or advancing successful pathways participants.

B. Career Pathway instructional design

1. The choice of industries and occupations for Career Pathway development is based on data and employer input showing both need for skilled workers and good job opportunities for individuals who increase their skills.
2. The curriculum is organized as a sequence of modules, each associated with a specific job or job advancement opportunity.
3. The modularized curriculum enables working adults to pursue postsecondary occupational education in manageable increments. The organization of the modules allows workers who move in and out of their studies to accumulate skills and credits with minimal inefficiencies and disruptions.
4. The RISE Career Pathway leads learners toward a technical diploma or applied associate degree in an occupation that pays family-sustaining wages.
5. Employers are engaged on an ongoing basis in identifying competencies for pathway curricula and validating pathways design and credentials.
6. Completion of each module in a pathway by a learner is associated with a credential recognized by employers within the industry and region.
7. Career Pathway curricula are linked to industry skill standards, certifications or licensing requirements.
8. The Career Pathway curriculum incorporates "learning by doing" opportunities through projects, laboratories, simulations, work experience and internships and grants credit for work experience.
9. Career pathways "road maps," are developed that show multiple entry and exit points and depicts vertical and lateral movement within an occupation or career cluster.
10. The fully developed pathway includes a bridge program that assists basic education and English-Language-Learning students matriculate and succeed in postsecondary Career Pathway instruction.

C. Adult basic education/English language learning bridge instructional design

1. The bridge program connects basic skills students to postsecondary training and provides college credits where possible. The bridge program employs contextualized learning strategies that integrate basic skills with industry or sector specific occupational skill development.
2. Bridge instruction employs teaching strategies, e.g., team teaching, and applied learning strategies, such as labs and simulations, effective for students with low literacy levels.
3. The curriculum incorporates appropriate career development activities.

D. Pathway support for life-long learning

1. Career planning services and help with academic and soft skills are provided.
2. Multiple agencies coordinate with each other and with employers to provide wrap-around support services — e.g., case management, coaching and mentoring, child care, financial aid, job placement, and referral to community resources — to help learners succeed in their combined education and work responsibilities.
3. Employers support employees' lifelong learning plans and incorporate the pathway design into employee development (e.g., tuition reimbursement) and advancement opportunities.

E. Systems and partnerships

Public and private funding (e.g., technical college, WIA, TANF, state/federal financial aid, employer tuition reimbursement) is coordinated to the maximum extent possible.

6. Findings from the UK consultations

6.1 Skills for Life – Background

Faced with a "vast basic skills problem" in the late 1990s (National Literacy Trust, n.d.), the British government asked Sir Claus Moser, Chairman of the Basic Skills Agency, to devise a strategy to address the low literacy and numeracy problem. The result was the 1999 Moser report, entitled *A fresh start – improving literacy and numeracy* (Department for Education and Employment, 1999). The report outlined worrisome survey results indicating that 1 in 5 adults in England were functionally illiterate — with many more estimated to be innumerate — and proposed an ambitious national strategy that would effectively change the country's approach to adult literacy and numeracy training. The National Strategy for Adult Basic Skills — known as the *Skills for Life* (*SfL*) strategy — was launched by the British government in 2001 in response to the recommendations set out in the Moser report (Department for Education and Employment, 2001).

The *SfL* strategy comprises a coordinated, cross-inter-departmental, multi-agency effort to lift the skills base of the nation using the following means:

- the creation of new national quality standards,
- a new and well-defined basic skills curriculum,
- a new system of teacher training and inspection,
- a new system of teacher qualifications,
- a revision of the national qualifications for adult basic skills,
- new national basic skills tests,
- the development of screening and diagnostic assessment material, and finally,
- a national survey of skills needs in the adult population.

The overarching public service agreement (PSA) target set out in the *SfL* strategy was to reduce by half the number of functionally illiterate and innumerate adults of working age by 2010. In other words, the aim was to have 2.25 million working age adults pass threshold tests for literacy and numeracy in less than ten years. These tests were closely linked to new national standards for literacy and numeracy, and were integrated into a new national qualifications framework (specifically, at three Entry levels, Level 1 and Level 2). The *SfL* strategy introduced a new core literacy and numeracy curriculum for adults which clearly sets out the specific skills that need to be taught and learned at each level. Qualifications that counted towards the *SfL* targets included passing a Key Skills test in Application of Number or Communication at Level 1 or 2, or achieving moderate to high marks on a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in English or Math.

By July 2004, over 825,000 adults had achieved a *SfL* qualification, exceeding the interim target of 750,000 (Department for Employment and Skills, 2004). By 2007, 1.5 million adults had achieved a

qualification (NAO, 2008), with the 2010 target of 2.25 million adults achieving a qualification met two years ahead of schedule.

The impact on the nation's skills base is not yet known, pending the follow up to the 2003 *Skills for Life* survey, which is anticipated to take place in 2010/2011. However, some of the evidence to date (in particular an evaluation by the National Audit Office in 2008) suggests that:

- Levels of success with *SfL* varies considerably by region;
- The focus on achieving targets/success on national tests excludes those at the most basic (pre-entry) levels of skills;
- "Hardest to reach" adults have been much less engaged, partly because they require more support to reach targets;
- Demand for ESOL training has grown substantially and exceeds supply;
- Numeracy dimension has been less developed, with less progress achieved;
- Quality of teaching has been variable.

The remainder of this section reviews findings from the UK consultation exercise, delving deeper into the policy and program landscape, the operation of *SfL*, its evolution, and possible effects. Results are organized by theme, drawing on each discussion as appropriate. Together, these consultations provided us with a detailed and comprehensive overview of the *SfL* initiative. The unique "insider" perspectives of our interviewees furnished us with contextual information that would not have otherwise been available. Moreover, they helped us to determine comparability of *SfL* and its associated programs with the innovative approaches identified in the literature review.

6.2 Policy context and *Skills for Life* characteristics

One of the key differences between Canada and the UK is that events in the UK education and skills systems are generally front-page news, not confined to the education press. This can be a mixed blessing, in that it can provide "traction" for policy and programmatic innovations, but can also entail considerable media scrutiny and the need for public relations work. With regard to *Skills for Life*, this tradition helped generate significant public and political support for the initiative (e.g., Daily Mirror headline, "40% of citizens can't do Maths!"), but has also put pressure on the evaluations. Particularly in its infancy, the initiative has enjoyed support even at the prime ministerial level, as well as substantial human resources and funding.

One of the key characteristics of *SfL* is that it was embedded less into educational institutions than into every sector or venue where adults meet in real life — sports and recreation centres, child care centres, housing council offices, hospitals, etc. This was deliberate; it was well understood by program developers that many people in the target population had had negative school experiences and would have no interest in going back. As one of our interviewees said, "*You have to go to where they are, not where you want to take them.*"

Another key characteristic was that *SfL* provided learners with the opportunity to access qualifications that were universally understood and valued, i.e., "authentic" and useful in a variety of settings such as

work, home, etc. It didn't focus solely on job qualifications, because it recognized that many people wanted to improve their skills for other reasons — to help their children with homework, to pay bills and budget, to understand cricket statistics, etc.

Accordingly, the national *SfL* policy framework is associated with a whole array of national, regional, and local approaches to promoting basic skills learning in a variety of venues, e.g., *Skills for Families* (family literacy), *Move On* and *learndirect* (both on-line learning initiatives), *Train to Gain* and *Union Learn* (both workplace-based initiatives, the latter now called *Bargain for Skills*), etc. A key contribution of *SfL* was that it took the National Standards/Qualifications and operationalized them — showed what they meant in practical terms — and developed this into curricula. Moreover, it made this curricula widely available and free of charge (on-line and in paper format), and provided a suite of assessment tools. More recent programs have focused on embedding this curricula and tailoring it to specific audiences/needs/locales such as vocational training at Further Education colleges and at workplaces.

This focus on making *SfL* broadly accessible meant that teachers in the education system were never intended to be the primary providers of *SfL* training; rather, it was intended that training be done by community members, staff of voluntary organizations, employees in workplaces, etc. Consequently, *SfL* included a program (*SfL Improvement Program*, now called the *SfL Support Program*) for those who led the learning (trainers), and those who supported and coordinated the learning (administrators), designed to help this workforce to improve their own skills and obtain qualifications themselves.

Despite the focus on broad accessibility, there has been a problem engaging people with multiple barriers. This is in part due to the need for measurable, ambitious targets to evaluate the initiative (Public Service Agreements targets); in practical terms, this has meant that priority has often been given to those who can achieve qualifications most easily so targets can be met. LLN teachers have also been protective of their students, not wanting them to fail national tests. Interviewees articulated a need to find ways to make the system as flexible as possible, recognizing that qualifications are not the ultimate goal, but rather a platform for further learning.

The *Move On* program has been particularly successful engaging people with very low levels of literacy and numeracy, in part because of a deliberate positive focus on the opportunity to enhance/develop current skills (no matter how low), rather than address "deficits." The program also takes innovative approaches to promoting assessment and making learning basic skills fun (e.g., *Test the Town*, using famous cricket players as spokespersons, etc.). Curricula and practice tests are available on-line, which has been a critical success factor — despite the assumption that people with low levels of literacy have no ICT skills, this is not always the case. Moreover, it helps considerably to avoid the embarrassment factor of having to admit low skills to a stranger or being assessed by them. Evaluations have shown greater learning gains for this type of independent learning than that done through course provision. *Move On* has now become embedded in the *SfL* curriculum as a separate strand, so trainers/career advisors, Jobcentre Plus staff etc. can learn how to engage a broader range of people in learning and skills development.

6.3 Policy context regarding the unemployed

- *SfL* was always intended as a voluntary initiative; the one attempt made by the UK government to tie participation to unemployment benefits failed miserably and was associated with no learning gains.

- Engagement of unemployed people in basic skills/LLN training has been fairly low through the employment system — only 5% of over 1 million unemployed are generally referred for a Skills Health check, and only another 5% are typically referred directly to training by Jobcentre Plus.
- UK has a similar situation to Canada whereby the employment sector tends to be systemically and culturally distinct from the learning/skills/educations sector. Funding for basic skills training is provided either by the Learning Skills Council or Jobcentre Plus (but local governments and the European Social Fund are also sources of funding). As in Canada, training is usually provided by public colleges (Further Education colleges are comparable to community colleges), private and non-profit/voluntary organizations. There are very few private colleges in the UK, however.
- The Leitch review (2006) was a "massive" driving force for integrating the two sectors. The resulting Integrated Employment and Skills service (IES) ensures that referrals to skills and education programs now happen in employment centres (Jobcentre Plus), with the result that unemployed job seekers don't just claim benefits, but have an assessment of skills within the first week of visiting Jobcentre Plus. The longer people are out of work, the more attention is paid to possible skills deficits, with increasingly comprehensive skills assessments at 13 and 26 weeks' unemployment. However, integration of the two systems has not been achieved without some significant culture "clash" (e.g., perception that skills are a means to getting a job vs. creating opportunity for self-development; learning for life, vs. learning for work).
- The new Adult Career Advancement Service (ACAS) is the most recent national initiative to further encourage people to engage in additional learning and skills development. As in Canada, the available training and labour market connections tend to drive the training plan that is developed for a given client.
- In addition to basic skills, the UK public employment service is funding vocational and pre-employment training specific to growth sectors (e.g., healthcare), that may also involve internships with employers and in-work training.

6.4 Engagement of employers and sectors

- Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are very engaged in the skills system, for example, helping to determine qualifications and standards, and the contents of apprenticeship programs. *SfL* is considered foundational to all sectors.
- *Train to Gain* has been a particularly successful means of engaging learners and employers in basic skills training. The Skills Pledge is recent part of this program, whereby an employer takes a public pledge to undertake skill development of his or her workforce. This entitles the company to the services of a Skills Broker (funded by a variety of arrangements with government departments, local authorities, and/or regional development agencies) who arranges for training providers assess employees' skills at the workplace. Part of this assessment allows employees to complete a portfolio and write the relevant national test, thereby obtaining qualifications for existing skills. Skills Brokers and training providers also work with the employer to develop and provide additional training for ongoing learning and skills enhancement.

- While initially many employers with low-skilled workforces were reluctant to engage in skills development for fear of losing their workers or demands for higher pay, evaluations have shown that workers who receive workplace-based training demonstrate greater loyalty to their employers and are more productive (e.g., fewer accidents and absences). Also, most employers will admit that a wider skills set is needed for an increasing number and variety of jobs, i.e., transferable skills, rather than job-specific skills.
- National Skills Academies are developing, run by SSCs, but these are primarily seen as being targeted for employed workers and apprentices (especially youth) rather than the unemployed.
- Engagement of employers in *SfL* has been critical; if employers recognize the importance of basic skills, "people listen – individuals and governments." Employers/SSCs can help to promote the need for training, e.g., CDI's (main employer body in UK) report on the financial impact of poor numeracy on a range of industries.

6.5 Embedded LLN in vocational training

- There are a number of initiatives to embed LLN into vocational training, though some have experienced challenges such as the need for distinct training staff. However, this appears to be a growing trend in the UK.
- *Move On* can also function as a bridge program for vocational training (e.g., *Move On to Hairdressing*). Recently, *Move On* has started working with FE colleges and workplaces to develop a tailored, first-stage course that focuses on the most critical job-specific skills (called Hot Topics). This allows learners who are already in vocational training to complete job-relevant basic skills at the same time (e.g., from home), while providing them the opportunity to continue LLN learning for additional qualifications. Training providers want a quick way to assess learners' need for remedial help and to provide it concurrent with vocational training (people weren't attending preliminary courses), so this is a valued service. Some learners have found it easier to absorb this type of focused, "brush-up" on specific skills course than a fully integrated course.
- There appears to be no UK equivalent to Career Pathways, but progress toward that model is seen in recent efforts to divide existing qualifications into units (that describe the hours of learning and specific skills) that can be achieved in stages, where formerly, the entire qualification had to be achieved. This is seen as better suiting the needs of employers who may not require workers to have the entire qualification.

6.6 Next steps

Skills for Life may well be phased out over the next 3-4 years, in favour of a broader initiative called *Functional Skills* (these include basic language and math skills as well as ICT and interpersonal skills; appears to be similar to our conception of Essential Skills). These will be a common set of standards to set requirements and expectations for foundational skill levels in literacy, numeracy and ICT, irrespective of work learning and deployment. This is meant to deal not only with a broader range of essential skills, but also with concerns about the range of *SfL* curriculum (literacy is seen as particularly limited to reading and meta-writing skills without including free writing, speaking and listening skills)

and a dated testing format (primarily through multiple choice questions). However, there is concern among staff of programs like Move On that these changes will make it even more difficult for adult learners at low skills levels, and for on-line learning. They are hoping to see a modular approach taken to testing, whereby basic functions are tested first (e.g., on-line), then more advanced skills such as problem-solving.

For the time being, *SfL* has been re-accredited until 2012. Its future will also depend on the outcome of the election, since the Conservatives have no wish to be associated with such a successful Labour Party initiative.

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