

Workplace literacy schemes are too short to improve skills

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The five billion pound Skills for Life programme is based on the assumption that an improvement in literacy and numeracy will increase people's earning potential, as well as their productivity and employability. However, according to Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London who led the study, workplace basic skills courses are having little impact, in their current form.

'It is clear from our research that [policymakers](#) are mistaken in expecting immediate and major effects on productivity,' says Professor Wolf.

She believes that one of the main reasons for the failure of the initiative is that courses were simply not long enough. While school children receive over 200 hours of direct instruction every term, over many years, participants on the Skills for Life courses received, on average, a total of 30 hours teaching.

The study also showed that the workplace does not support formal learning. Firms and public sector organisations find it hard to fit classes in with work patterns and are unable to provide the long-term stability necessary for effective learning.

Indeed, the study finds that the Skills for Life strategy has left no permanent legacy of workplace training. None of the employers who received free on-site courses continued them after government funding ended. 'If the [productivity gains](#) were as obvious as the government has claimed, this would be very short-sighted of them,' says Professor Wolf.

'In fact, there were no big obvious gains.'

A year after students had taken the Skills for Life course; statistically there were no significant improvements in literacy for English-speaking employees. Some of those, who went on to develop their skills as part of their normal job, did improve, while participants whose work continued to involve minimal use of literacy did not. Indeed, Professor Wolf notes that people's jobs can be far more important for boosting literacy skills than a short formal course.

However, the study also found that employers were not particularly concerned about their employees' literacy skills, and increased productivity was not something that either employers or learners expected. Instead, one of the broader benefits of the course was that it boosted workers' confidence. A significant number of participants went on to do further courses. More than half said that they read more, and three quarters felt differently about education as a result of the course.

'Both adult learners and their employers have a far more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the workplace than does the Skills for Life strategy,' concludes Alison Wolf. 'Ministers keep announcing that huge numbers of people have 'improved their basic skills' because of Skills for Life. They need to realise that attending a short course, or collecting a certificate, does not mean that people have necessarily learned anything.'

The research team is explaining to policy-makers precisely how current funding and entitlement rules stop adults with poor basic [skills](#) from obtaining the extended tuition they need and suggesting ways in which the problem might be addressed.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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