
IMMIGRANT WORKERS AND THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

By Anne Green

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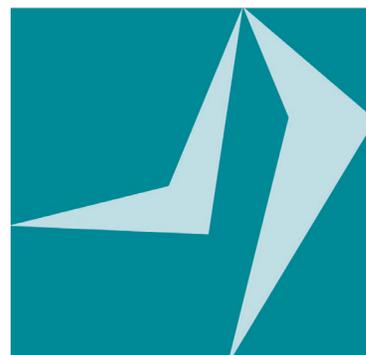


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Executive Summary

Workforce development efforts in the United Kingdom (UK) encompass both centrally driven and decentralized qualities, resulting in differing outcomes in the four countries of the United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The training and workforce development system in England, which accounts for 85 percent of the UK population, has two main structural characteristics: First, it is increasingly employer-led, meaning that the content and provision of training is largely left to employers rather than being regulated by the state or negotiated by social partners.¹ Second, it is flexible, as individuals who have missed out on formal training can access courses and apprenticeships specifically designed for nontraditional students later in life. This flexibility is likely to benefit immigrants, even though they are not specifically targeted.

While training programs vary across the United Kingdom, other aspects of workforce development — including immigration and employment policies — are centralized. Alongside attempts to persuade employers to invest in the skills of their workforce, skills policy in the United Kingdom emphasizes *individual responsibility and fairness*: the idea that those who gain most from training (namely, individuals and employers) should take greater responsibility for ensuring their skills needs are met, and also take on more of the costs (even more relevant in the current context of austerity). Meanwhile, public funds are generally channeled toward the most needy: youth, those lacking basic skills, and the unemployed. UK government funding does not concentrate specifically on training for immigrants, with the exception of refugees and a narrow group of people eligible for English language instruction programs. But four core aspects of the system have particular implications for immigrants:

UK government funding does not concentrate specifically on training for immigrants.

- ***Employers have a lot of power in the current system.*** Immigrants' access to skills development depends largely on employers' policies and not on the standards set by the government — a fact that may limit access, as employers whose business model depends on low-skilled workers have little incentive to invest in the up-skilling of their workforce.
- ***Flexibility may benefit some immigrant workers.*** The flexible nature of the system (particularly features such as few age limits on education and the availability of adult apprenticeships) may help immigrants with nontraditional backgrounds; and the relative lack of regulation and qualifications requirements also make the labor market more accessible for immigrants without host-country qualifications.
- ***The complexity of the system may disadvantage the most vulnerable immigrants.*** The complexity of the skills system in England, which has undergone rapid institutional changes in a short period of time, poses challenges for all individuals (and employers), but it disproportionately affects immigrants, who may have less knowledge of how to navigate the system. For example, some immigrants may have insufficient English language expertise or lack knowledge about where relevant courses are provided. This underlines a need for targeted information, advice, and guidance — precisely the services that have been squeezed in the context of austerity and the associated reductions in public funding. These barriers often mean that those most in need of education and skills development are least likely to participate.
- ***The emphasis on individual responsibility may be a deterrent.*** The emphasis on individuals investing their own resources (or taking out low-cost loans from the government) to participate

1 Training is regulated by the government in a few cases, however: when it is for the purpose of compliance with health and safety legislation, when it leads to a sectoral/occupational license, and when it results in a formal qualification.



in skills development may disproportionately impact immigrants, who may not have the funds or country-specific knowledge to do so. For example, immigrant workers (and their employers) are now expected to take on some of the costs of courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), which the government stopped funding in 2006-07. This raises concerns about affordability (especially for those in low-paid employment), and the longer-term impact of individuals' inability to access other forms of learning/skills development because of insufficient language skills.

The UK government has recently moved away from a *supply*-side model of skills development that aims to increase the number of workers who achieve a certain level of qualification, to focus instead on raising *demand* for skills by employers. Focusing only on supply — as some critics have argued — is problematic because some employers are not interested in employing more-skilled workers. Even when workers acquire new skills, these may not be put to good use by employers whose businesses rely on low-skilled labor.

Meanwhile, efforts to raise the demand for skills and persuade employers to link their business and skills strategies have proved challenging. While multiple government agencies have aimed to engage with employers and encourage them to invest in skills — including creating ways for employers to influence the design of UK-wide skills policy — their impact is often unclear. Forty-five percent of employers participating in the 2010 UK Employer Perspectives Survey considered government efforts “largely irrelevant” to their training and development programs. Moreover, a majority of those employers who do provide workplace training choose not to align their training with the central government’s skills and qualifications system (i.e., by providing training that would lead to a nationally recognized qualification).² Under the current system, whether or not a worker receives training depends more on his or her employer’s willingness to provide (and fund) courses — and whether the individual qualifies for public funding based on demonstrable need — than anything else.

Overall then, employers play a central role in how existing skills are valued, and in creating opportunities for skills development. Since the availability of training varies across sectors, occupations, and establishments, the employers’ market strategies play an important role in skills development. This highlights the crucial role of employers’ demand for skills, and national policy in the United Kingdom is increasingly focused on raising this demand.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to understand how effectively the workforce development and vocational training infrastructure in the United Kingdom accommodates the needs of immigrant workers. It examines how the UK workforce development system is structured (specifically looking at England),³ and how well the various programs serve the needs of diverse populations, including immigrants. The report begins with an overview of the vocational education and training (VET) system in England, the role of key actors within the system, and developments in skills policy. The report discusses the funding and delivery of training, eligibility conditions, and barriers to accessing training, responses to diversity, and specific barriers for immigrants. In doing so, it seeks to examine whether the workforce development system effectively equips underutilized workers to meet labor market demands.

2 Jan Shury, David Vivian, Ben Davies, and Katie Gore, *UK Employer Perspectives Survey 2010* (Wath-upon-Deane, UK: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2011), www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/employer-perspectives-survey-2010.pdf.

3 While the United Kingdom (UK) is made up of England, Wales, Scotland (which together comprise Great Britain), and Northern Ireland, the focus of this case study is England, which accounts for around 85 percent of the population of the United Kingdom. Immigration policy is the responsibility of the UK government at Westminster, and while employment policy is not devolved within Great Britain, skills policy is devolved (i.e., Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have separate skills policies from England).



II. Overview of the Vocational Education and Training System

The education and training system in England includes separate programs for students who undertake university-based higher education, and those who pursue further education through continuing or adult education community colleges and institutions. For enrollees in the further education system, the central government offers some funding — in particular to young, unemployed jobseekers who lack basic skills in English and mathematics.

A. The Education System in England

Schooling in the formal education system in England is compulsory until the age of 16, but some individuals may continue in school until age 18 before moving on to higher education in a university setting. Others leave school at the age of 16 and move into the further education system. The further education system of colleges is well established and offers a huge range of academic and vocational programs, from entry level (for those lacking any formal qualifications) to higher education levels.⁴ There are more than 220 further education colleges across England. Added to this are 900 independent training providers and approximately 2,500 training organizations with which colleges and providers subcontract to provide additional services.

Further education colleges and independent providers may also contract with firms to provide employer-led training. Firms may prefer to work with independent training providers over further education colleges to deliver employer-led training courses because of these courses' flexible and tailored nature (e.g., they may be conducted on employers' premises). Higher education providers (i.e., universities and some further education colleges) may also provide customized vocational education and training or tailored high-level training to employers, as well as deliver academic courses.

At the end of compulsory schooling,⁵ students take formal examinations to measure their achievements. The target is for as many students as possible to reach a Level 2⁶ (lower-secondary) qualification — regarded as the minimum level necessary to enter the labor market around age 16. The proportion entering employment at this stage has diminished considerably over the past four decades, however, as the so-called youth labor market⁷ has virtually disappeared.⁸

4 Further education colleges differ from private independent training providers. They receive some state funding, and individuals are responsible for paying for courses, although employers may contribute to payment for some courses.

5 Schooling is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 16. There is a movement to raise the participation age in stages so that young people would have some compulsory education/training until the age of 18 in England.

6 Level 2 consists of a minimum of five General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) at grades A, B, and C. The levels can be further classified into “low skills” (no qualifications and Level 1), “intermediate skills” (Levels 2 and 3), and “high skills” (Level 4 and above).

7 These included less-skilled roles in manufacturing, office assistants, etc.

8 Typically, after completion of compulsory education in secondary schools (at age 16, or again at 18 if they opt for post-compulsory education), young people may choose to continue in education and/or training at school, a sixth-form college or a further education college, or enter employment (with or without training). Those who do not follow any of these routes are known as NEET (not in employment, education, or training).



Box 1. Background on Immigration Policy in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom may be characterized as a liberal market economy, in which economic principles are prioritized. This is evident in both its workforce development system and immigration policy. Two key aspects of immigration in the United Kingdom are of particular relevance for this case study.

The first is the *prevalence of labor migrants from new European Union (EU) Member States* among recent immigrant inflows to the United Kingdom, a result of the UK government's decision to open its labor market immediately to migrant workers from new EU Member States in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004. Between 2004 and 2011, the number of foreign nationals living and working in the United Kingdom increased from 1.5 million to 2.5 million. This increase was dominated by nationals from the Eastern and Central European countries that joined the European Union in 2004, with Poles accounting for around two-thirds. This unprecedented inflow of labor migrants led to a shift in the immigration debate in the United Kingdom away from earlier primary concerns regarding asylum to focus instead mainly on labor migration from Eastern and Central Europe.

The second important trend is the United Kingdom's move toward *a more managed migration system*. A point-based system (PBS) was introduced in 2008 to favor high-skilled workers needed to fill shortages in the UK economy, and restrict the labor migration of those from outside the European Economic Area (EEA). The UK coalition government has made several adjustments to the PBS with the intention of reducing migrant inflows, while at the same time increasing the emphasis on specific required skills. Alongside free movement within the EEA, the labor migration system for non-EEA nationals is for the most part shaped by demand (i.e., employers select migrants — within the scope of rules set by government — to fill specific vacancies).

Source: John Salt, *International Migration and the United Kingdom: Report of the United Kingdom Correspondent to the OECD*, 2011 (London: University College London, Migration Research Unit, 2011), www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/transnational-spaces/migration-research-unit/pdfs/Sop11.pdf.

In September 2004 it became a statutory requirement for schools in England to provide work-related learning to all pupils in compulsory education at the lower secondary level, including opportunities for learning through work (i.e., gaining work experience), learning about work, career education, and learning *for* work (by developing enterprise and employability skills). Vocational education for students between the ages of 16 and 18 may involve a work-based training program (usually an apprenticeship), or, more likely, be based at a further education college (or other school).⁹

A review of vocational education for young people ages 16-19, published in 2011,¹⁰ raised concerns about some aspects of this educational track, and suggested that as many as one-third of students in vocational education were studying for qualifications that neither had much impact on subsequent earnings,¹¹ nor offered a substantive platform for progress in the labor market or the education system.¹² There are concerns that vocational qualifications in England are narrower and shallower than those found in many other parts of Europe.¹³

Currently, VET policy in England places a great deal of emphasis on the apprenticeship. Originally intended for young people, the apprenticeship's upper age limit of 25 years was removed in 2004.

9 Programs leading to vocational qualifications (at levels 2 and 3) form the central part of further education colleges' curriculum (and for 16- to 18-year-olds are mainly college based, as opposed to employer based). See Simon Norton, "Potential Realised or Same Old Cinderella? Future Options for England's Further Education Sector" (SKOPE Research Paper 109, Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance [SKOPE], Cardiff, 2012), www.skope.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/WP109_0.pdf.

10 See Alison Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report* (London: UK Department for Education, 2011), www.education.gov.uk/a0074953/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report.

11 See Stephen Machin and Anna Vignoles, "Education Policy in the UK" (CEE Discussion Paper 57, Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics, London, March 2006), <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp57.pdf>.

12 See Jonathan Payne and Ewat Keep, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Policy in England under the Coalition Government" (SKOPE Research Paper No. 102, SKOPE, Cardiff, 2012), www.skope.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/WP102.pdf.

13 See Michaela Brockmann, Linda Clarke, and Christopher Winch, *Knowledge, Skills and Competence in the European Labour Market: What's in a Vocational Qualification?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011).



Apprenticeships provide work-based training in a broad range of sectors¹⁴ that allows trainees to learn new skills and gaining recognized qualifications while working. Apprenticeships vary in content and size, and normally last between one and three years. There has been a significant expansion of apprenticeships in recent years, particularly among adults, to address skills deficiencies.¹⁵

B. Who Is Eligible for Publicly Funded Training?

Not all individuals and employers have access to further education and skills development free of charge. The main targets of central government funding are (1) young adults; (2) those who lack basic skills, such as in English and mathematics; and (3) those who are unemployed and seeking work. While the government does not specifically prioritize immigrants, some immigrants do fall into these priority groups.

If immigrants receive a jobseekers' allowance or employment support allowance,¹⁶ they will be allocated a personal adviser (who is responsible for advising claimants and developing an action plan with them) by either the public employment service or by a private-sector contractor. Benefit recipients are eligible for government-funded training support (as agreed on with their personal adviser) to facilitate entry into employment. Eligibility rules for government-supported adult training¹⁷ are determined on an annual basis by the Skills Funding Agency.¹⁸ In order for an individual to be eligible for the agency's funding, he or she must be legally resident in the United Kingdom at the start of the program.¹⁹ In addition to refugees and legal migrant workers, migrants from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) who are in the United Kingdom with any work-related immigration permission are also eligible for funding after three years of residence in the United Kingdom. The spouses and dependents of legally resident migrants are also generally eligible for training assistance.

The education system in England has several points of flexibility. Students can study for qualifications later in life, and their professional experience may be taken into account for admission into various courses.²⁰ This means that it is possible for people who lack formal qualifications or who have missed out on training at an earlier stage to achieve qualifications later on. There are, for example, higher education courses specifically designed for individuals who want to take a university course but who did not gain the requisite qualifications while at school. These courses aim to prepare adult learners, from nontraditional backgrounds and underrepresented groups, for admission to university.²¹

In general, the relatively flexible nature of the workforce development system and the relative lack of regulation (by European standards) in the labor market (i.e., the limited number of positions where specific qualifications are an absolute prerequisite for employment) allow immigrants to access jobs more easily.

14 Apprenticeships have traditionally been most common in manufacturing and construction, but are now available in many service sectors.

15 See UK Parliament Website, "Apprenticeships," April 2, 2012, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/writev/1843/app096.htm. Although apprenticeships are expanding, the unwillingness of employers to get involved (especially in apprenticeships for people ages 16 to 18) has acted as a brake on their expansion. See Norton, "Potential Realised or Same Old Cinderella?"

16 In order to receive these benefits, claimants must be part of the Work Related Activity Group. Work Related Activity Group members are claimants who the Department for Work and Pensions consider will be capable of work at some time in the future and who are capable of taking steps toward moving into work (or work-related activities) immediately.

17 That is, for those ages 19 years and over.

18 The eligibility rules mentioned here are for 2011-12. See Skills Funding Agency, "Learner Eligibility and Contribution Rules," accessed October 6, 2013, <http://skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/providers/allthelatest/providerupdate/LearnerEligibility.htm>.

19 Any person subject to a Home Office deportation order will be ineligible for funding. A person who is "settled" (i.e., who has either indefinite leave to enter or remain, or has the right of abode) in the United Kingdom, and who has been ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom for the preceding three years — and whose main purpose for such residence was not to receive full-time education during any part of the three-year period — is eligible for funding.

20 Natalia Cuddy and Tom Leney, *Vocational Education and Training in the United Kingdom: Short Description*, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) Panorama Series 111 (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2005), www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5159_en.pdf.

21 A typical access program takes a year to complete on a full-time basis, or one or two years part-time.



III. The Evolution of Skills Policy in England

Before 2010 skills policy in England emphasized raising skill levels in order to achieve higher levels of employment, productivity, and prosperity.²² Reacting to concerns that too many workers had only low skill levels (and, in parallel, that a relatively high proportion of jobs required only low skills), policymakers focused on boosting the supply of skills through publicly funded investments. It was hoped that a steady supply of more-skilled workers would lead to greater international competitiveness and productivity growth, as well as greater social mobility for individuals.

The government is placing more emphasis on the utilization of skills in the workplace, and specifically on raising the demand for skills by employers.

But, in the past few years, there has been a shift away from emphasizing skills supply. Instead, the government is placing more emphasis on the utilization of skills in the workplace, and specifically on raising the demand for skills by employers. In practice, this means there is a greater focus on persuading employers to link their business and skills strategies, to raise the level of skills they require, and to invest in the skills of the workforce. An example of a policy initiative in support of this trend is the Employer Ownership Pilot, which offers all employers in England direct access to up to GBP 250 million in public investment.²³

A. Key Features of the Workforce Development System in England

England's training and workforce development system may be characterized in the following ways:

- **Employer-led on a voluntary basis.** Decisions on whether or not to train, and on the precise content of training policies — with the exception of those leading to formal qualifications — are largely left to employers, rather than being regulated by the state or negotiated by social partners.²⁴
- **Individualistic.** Decisions on access to postcompulsory education and training are left largely to the individual, except where a job requires certain entry qualifications.²⁵ This means that individuals are free to exercise a good deal of choice about whether to participate in postcompulsory education and training and about the mix of courses and qualifications they undertake.
- **Flexible.** Individuals who did not obtain qualifications or training early on have opportunities to resume training at any point in their lives. Moreover, the relative lack of regulation within most sectors and occupations means that there are opportunities for individuals to switch jobs between sectors/occupations.
- **Institutionally unstable and complex.** Compared to most European countries, changes in skills policy in the United Kingdom — and changes to the institutions charged with managing them — are frequent. As a result, the workforce development system and associated funding and delivery mechanisms are complex. Complexity and change together have the potential to increase confusion and discourage engagement in the skills development system among both native workers and immigrants.²⁶

22 Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), *Skills for Sustainable Growth* (London: BIS, 2010), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/further-education-skills/docs/S/10-1274-skills-for-sustainable-growth-strategy.pdf.

23 BIS, "Employer Ownership Pilot," updated July 17, 2013, www.bis.gov.uk/policies/further-education-skills/employers/employer-ownership-pilot.

24 Traditionally, trade unions and other social partners have played a smaller role in the vocational education and training (VET) system in England than in many other European countries. That said, trade unions are known to play a role in encouraging workplace learning, and in stimulating both employer and individual demand for skills.

25 Cuddy and Leney, *Vocational Education and Training in the United Kingdom*.

26 Kathrin Hoeckel, et al., *Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training — England and Wales* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2009), www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/43947857.pdf.



Box 2. Key Actors in the Skills System in England

This box illustrates the complexity of skills development policy in England, which spans the portfolios of a wide variety of departments and agencies across both central and local government.

Central Government

- **The Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS)** sets out annual policy priorities for the skills sector in a “Skills Investment Statement.” This details the overall level of funding available to the sector to deliver on government policy.
- **The Skills Funding Agency (SFA)** is an executive agency of BIS, and is responsible for routing skills funding to local vocational education and training providers, in line with the intentions of the government and the “Skills Investment Statement.”
 - **Within SFA, the Employer Reference Group helps ensure that employers and their representative organizations have the opportunity to contribute their expertise to help shape and implement skills policy.**
 - **The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) develops relationships with businesses across the country to drive forward the government’s goal of increasing apprenticeship placements.**
 - **Through account managers at SFA, colleges and training organizations can access financial guidance for all their adult and apprenticeship skills programs.** Colleges and training organizations receive an individual funding “envelope” (a specific allocation of funds) based on their track record. They have autonomy over allocating this budget toward local skills training that best meets the needs of the business and local community. The SFA does not fund individual learners directly, but works to provide more information to inform their choice.
- Local authorities and the **Education Funding Agency** (formerly the Young People’s Learning Agency) have responsibility for securing education and training provision for young people up to age 19.
- **The Department for Work and Pensions** oversees **Jobcentre Plus** (the public employment service in Great Britain). They have responsibility for skills development for unemployed benefit claimants who are seeking work. Active labor market policy and advisory services for the unemployed are delivered through **personal advisers**.
- **The Department for Education** manages the education system for children and young adults.
- **The National Careers Service** provides access to information, careers, and skills advice.

Other Players in the Skills System

- **The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UK Commission)** is a social partnership, led by commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions, and civil society. A key objective of the commission is to encourage organizations to improve workforce skills and productivity. It directs research on skills and is involved in managing a number of skills initiatives.
- **Sector skills councils** are employer-led, UK-wide organizations designed to represent employers’ needs within the skills system. They work in partnership with the UK Commission, and offer employers an opportunity to influence the skills system through the development of qualifications and training relevant to their needs.
- **Local enterprise partnerships** between local authorities and businesses have a central role in determining local economic priorities, which have implications for local skills needs.

Source: Author’s compilation from various sources.



B. Developments in Skills Policy in the Past Decade

The Leitch Review of Skills, which published its final report in 2006, analyzed the United Kingdom's long-term skill needs and set out a vision for the United Kingdom to become a world leader in skills by 2020.²⁷ The review set targets for enhancing skills attainment at various levels — including improving functional literacy and numeracy, improving the proportion of the adult workforce qualified through Level 2 (lower secondary), shifting the balance of intermediate skills from Level 2 to Level 3 (upper secondary), and accelerating the increase in the share of the adult population with high-level skills at Level 4 (postsecondary) and above.²⁸

While the Leitch Review primarily saw the role of the state as helping individuals improve their skills, it acknowledged that more direct intervention might be needed in cases of market failure (e.g., in training for basic skills). Hence, government-funded adult learning was focused mainly on Level 2 qualifications and on a flagship “Train to Gain” program, which provided a subsidy to employers to help low-skilled employees gain nationally recognized Level 2 (and, later, Level 3) qualifications.²⁹ The central government also took an increasingly active role in shaping the direction and structure of the education and training system (rather than leaving the content and nature of training solely to employers), and in turn, public funding for training was focused on programs leading to the qualifications underpinning these targets.

Despite improvements in skills supply in subsequent years, the goal of becoming a world leader in skills looked increasingly unattainable. Some commentators³⁰ argue that the assumptions underlying the supply-side model advocated by the Leitch Review were problematic, at least in part because some employers are not interested in employing more-skilled workers and instead pursue low-value-added skills strategies, investing only (if at all) in training programs that focus on minimal or low-level skills for low-skilled work. In other words, workers might have new skills but employers will not necessarily put them to good use. This may create a “low skills equilibrium,” where both the demand for and the supply of skills remain low because neither employers nor state institutions have an incentive to improve skills.³¹ Likewise, others³² suggest that enhanced economic competitiveness and productivity rest on raising the *demand* for skills³³ and focusing on utilization of skills,³⁴ rather than pursuing improvements in skills supply.

27 Leitch Review of Skills, *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy — World Class Skills* (London: HM Treasury, 2006), http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130129110402/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/leitch_finalreport051206.pdf.

28 Details of the levels (as set out in Leitch, *Leitch Review of Skills*) are as follows: Level 1: General Certificate of Education (GCSE) and Ordinary (O) levels (i.e., examinations generally taken at the end of compulsory education at age 16) or equivalent at Grades D-G; National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 1; Level 2: five or more GCSEs or O levels or equivalent at Grades A*-C; NVQ Level 2; GNVQ intermediate level; Level 3: two or more Advanced (A) levels or equivalent; NVQ Level 3; Ordinary National Diploma (ONS); City and Guilds Advanced Craft; Level 4: first or other degree; NVQ Level 4; Higher National Diploma (HND); Higher National Certificate (HNC); and higher education diploma; nursing; teaching; Level 5: higher degree; NVQ Level 5.

29 Following the election of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat government in 2010, this program was discontinued.

30 See Payne and Keep, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?”

31 See David Finegold and David Soskice, “The Failure of Training in Britain,” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 4, no. 3 (1988): 21–53; Rob Wilson and Terence Hogarth, eds. *Tackling the Low Skills Equilibrium: A Review of the Issues and Some New Evidence* (London: UK Department for Trade and Industry, 2003), www.bis.gov.uk/files/file11004.pdf.

32 See John Buchanan, Linda Scott, Serena Yu, Hanna Schutz, and Michelle Jakub, “Skills Demand and Utilisation: An International Review of Approaches to Measurement and Policy Development” (OECD Local Economic and Employment Development [LEED] Working Papers 2010/4, OECD, Paris, April 2010), www.oecd-ilibrary.org/industry-and-services/skills-demand-and-utilisation_5km8zddfr2jk-en.

33 Since skills are a derived demand, depending on the employer's position in the value chain.

34 This is about the effective application and use of skills in the workplace — that is, (1) the better use of skills and (2) the use of better skills. See Chris Warhurst and Patricia Findlay, “More Effective Skills Utilisation: The Shifting Terrain/Shifting the Terrain of Skills Policy in Scotland” (SKOPE Research Paper No. 107, SKOPE and the Universities of Sydney and Strathclyde, Cardiff, 2011), www.skope.ox.ac.uk/publications/more-effective-skills-utilisation-shifting-terrain-skills-policy-scotland.



Box 3. The “Supply-Side” Strategy of Skills Development

The Labour government’s skills policy from 1997 to 2010 placed the enhancement of skills supply and a commitment to a flexible, lightly regulated labor market at center stage. The policy rested on three assumptions:

- **A “supply-push” effect:** Increases in the publicly funded supply of qualified labor will enable employers to shift “up-market” and adopt higher value-added, higher-productivity, and higher-skilled production strategies.
- **Increasing the qualifications of low-skilled individuals** will allow them to move off welfare, enter employment, and progress in the labor market.
- **Public subsidies** (through programs such as Train to Gain) can be used to leverage the additional employer buy-in and investment necessary to meet the targets for developing a world-class skills base.

Source: Compilation of author’s own research.

In 2010 a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government replaced the Labour government. Like the previous Labour administrations, the coalition government’s skills policy (from 2010) rested on the idea that skills have a crucial role to play in fostering economic competitiveness and social inclusion. But whereas New Labour’s skills policy involved targets, top-down management of the skills system, and elements of public subsidy, the coalition government’s approach has been characterized by a move away from top-down management and toward a greater role for markets, more private investment, and smaller government — resulting in an abolishment of the Leitch targets.³⁵

This affected employers in at least three major ways: the coalition government discontinued the Train to Gain program, which provided a direct payment subsidy to employers to help lower-skilled workers gain qualifications; placed a greater onus on employers to fund more of their training themselves; and promoted apprenticeships (which to some extent may be thought of as a continued, indirect subsidy to employers, since the government pays for part of the cost of the training).

*Enhanced economic competitiveness and productivity
rest on raising the demand for skills... rather than
pursuing improvements in skills supply.*

The coalition government’s skills strategy³⁶ has been informed by four principles:

- **Fairness.** The cost of various activities, once met by the state, are passed to the beneficiaries of those activities (i.e., employers and individuals), while the state continues to help those least able to help themselves. In policy terms this means that funding for adult education and training is focused on (1) those lacking the basic skills to access employment and (2) the unemployed actively seeking work. This represents a narrower coverage than Train to Gain: it might benefit some immigrants lacking basic language skills but leaves out individuals with middle- and higher-level skills. (The rationale for this is that skills play an important role in fostering social inclusion and social mobility, and so prioritizing investment where it is most needed makes sense in societal and economic terms).

35 Payne and Keep, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?”

36 Set out in BIS, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*.



- **Responsibility.** Employers and individuals are encouraged to take greater responsibility for ensuring that their skills needs are met. The rationale underlying this principle is that the government cannot tackle the skills challenge on its own, and (linked to the principle of fairness) those individuals and employers who gain most from training should make a greater contribution to the costs of courses. Meanwhile, the government is emphasizing investment in good-quality information to support individual decisions, providing access to financing (via loans), and supporting the creation of a marketplace in which employers and individuals can influence what training is provided. Greater freedom for further education colleges, together with an emphasis on greater provision of labor market information, helps underpin these aims.
- **Freedom.** The new policy moves away from the Leitch targets, which set national goals for numbers of individuals with qualifications at specific levels. Instead, more control is given to the various actors within the workforce development system (individuals, employers, and trainers), with trainers responding even more than previously to the needs of employers and individuals.
- **Localism.** There is now more emphasis on policy decisions being made at the local level and away from central government. This entails more freedom for further education colleges to respond to local labor market needs, for example, by tailoring training programs to the needs of local employers.

These principles underpin a *voluntary, individualistic, and flexible* workforce development system. The emphasis is on employers investing in the skills of their workforce and learners selecting training and qualifications that are valued by business, delivered in a marketplace in which a broad range of autonomous training providers compete to attract learners.

In pursuit of these goals, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills encourages organizations to improve workforce skills and productivity. The UK Commission oversees Investors in People (IiP), an accredited standard that can be used by employers in marketing themselves to investors, customers, and employees to signal their commitment to business improvement through investing in their workforce.³⁷ The UK Commission is also involved in a number of other initiatives promoting skills development among employers. For instance, it is administering the Employer Investment Fund³⁸ and the Growth and Innovation Fund,³⁹ both designed to help employers find innovative solutions to skills problems and invest further in skills. The emphasis here is very much on assisting select employers to find their own solutions that, subsequently, can be communicated to the population of employers. The UK Commission is also running the Employer Ownership of Skills pilot program, which began by investing up to £250 million over two years (starting in 2011) in programs designed and run by employers. The program aims to increase

37 It provides employers with an advisory framework, tailored to their own specific circumstances, in which they can develop the skills of their workforce to support their business goals and thereby improve business performance. Twenty-six percent of the UK workforce is employed by organizations that have been awarded the Investors in People (IiP) standard or are working toward it. See IiP, "What We Do," accessed October 6, 2013, www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/Facts/Pages/default.aspx. Research on organizations making use of IiP indicates that it is perceived as beneficial to their organizational performance. See Penny Tamkin, Marc Cowling, and Will Hunt, *People and the Bottom Line* (Brighton, UK: Institute for Employment Studies, 2008), www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/documents%20hidden/research/pbl%20-%20final%20full%20report%20inc%20appendices.pdf; Rosie Gloster, Freddie Sumption, Tom Higgins, and Annette Cox, *Perspectives and Performance of Investors in People: A Literature Review*, Evidence Report 24 (Wath-upon-Deane, UK: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010), www.ukces.org.uk/publications/er24-perspectives-and-performances; Rosie Gloster, Tom Higgins, and Annette Cox, *Exploring Employer Behaviour in Relation to Investors in People*, Evidence Report 27 (Wath-upon-Deane, UK: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2011), www.ukces.org.uk/publications/er27-employer-behaviour-iip. Though there may not be hard measures of the standard's impact on organizational performance, case study evidence suggests that changes as a result of engaging with IiP tend, at least at the outset, to be behavioral and cultural, involving the introduction of performance management systems, introduction of training for a broader range of staff than was formerly the case, and intensification of communication activity around business strategy. See Annette Cox, Tom Higgins, and Penny Tamkin, *Evaluation of Investors in People: Employer Case Studies*, Evidence Report 58 (Wath-upon-Deane, UK: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2012), www.ukces.org.uk/publications/er58-evaluation-of-iip-employer-case-studies.

38 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, "Employment Investment Fund," accessed October 7, 2013, www.ukces.org.uk/ourwork/investment/eif.

39 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, "Growth and Innovation Fund," accessed October 7, 2013, www.ukces.org.uk/ourwork/investment/growthinnovationfund.



the number of people being trained and to improve the relevance of training — to both employers and their industry — and the way in which training is delivered.⁴⁰

The UK Commission works in partnership with the sector skills councils to create conditions for increased employer investment in skills. Although sector skills councils have a UK-wide remit in developing and approving vocational qualifications (including occupational frameworks for apprenticeships) within their sectors, their practical role in influencing employers should not be overstated.⁴¹ It is pertinent to note that even though funding agencies and sector skills councils are key actors in the VET system, and the UK Commission both influences and facilitates good practices, their influence over employers may not, in fact, be strong. Of the employers who participated in the 2010 UK Employer Perspectives Survey, 45 percent indicated that government played a limited role in their training and development programs.⁴²

*The UK Commission works in partnership with
the sector skills councils to create conditions for
increased employer investment in skills.*

C. How Government Funding Is Allocated

The ethos of voluntarism and the principles of fairness and responsibility outlined above underpin the key features of funding and delivery of England’s workforce development system. In the context of austerity, the UK government announced in 2010 that it would put in place a suite of reforms to focus public subsidies where they might have the greatest impact.⁴³ To this end, a greater share of government funding for training has concentrated on:

- **The most disadvantaged groups.** The UK government fully funds qualifications for active jobseekers (those who receive a jobseekers’ allowance or employment support allowance), depending on what they need to help them enter and stay in work.
- **Those lacking basic skills.** The government fully subsidizes basic literacy and numeracy qualifications for adults (which includes only the most basic English language training for immigrants).
- **Young adults.** The government fully subsidizes young adults (ages 19 to 24) working toward their first Level 2 or Level 3 qualification.
- **Apprenticeships.** The UK coalition government’s flagship VET policy (and the primary means of delivering government-funded, workplace-based training) supports adult apprenticeships.

While the first three groups have been a focus of government funding for some time, there has been greater investment in apprenticeships since the coalition government came into office in 2010. The government has signaled an intention to reduce the amount of funding for further education. As the govern-

40 See UK Commission for Employment and Skills, “Employer Ownership of Skills Pilot,” accessed October 7, 2013, www.ukces.org.uk/ourwork/employer-ownership.

41 The 2010 UK Employer Perspectives Survey found that only one-third of establishments covered by a sector skills council (SSC) had heard of their SSC, and of these, less than one-quarter had dealings with their SSC in the past 12 months. The survey showed a high satisfaction level (a score of 7 out of 10, where 10 is highly satisfied and 1 is highly dissatisfied) among those employers who had contacted their SSC. See Shury, Vivian, Davies, and Gore, *UK Employer Perspectives Survey 2010*.

42 Whereas only 7 percent indicated that government was a “key resource.” See Shury, Vivian, Davies, and Gore, *UK Employer Perspectives Survey 2010*. This finding chimes with the voluntaristic nature of the VET system. However, there is a strong relationship between employers’ level of engagement with the skills system and the value they place on government support in this area.

43 BIS, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*.



ment reduces its contribution to the costs of some VET programs, the expectation is that the associated shortfall will be picked up by individuals and employers.⁴⁴

Local authorities remain in place but...they have seen cuts in public funding, which in turn have had consequences for service provision.

For those individuals outside the scope of government funding, loans are available to help finance both further education and higher education, thus shifting more of the responsibility to individuals to invest in learning at advanced and higher levels. Research on attitudes toward further education loans reveals that most individuals would not be inclined to take out a loan to fund their study.⁴⁵ Student loans are also playing a more prominent role in higher education, as the government has raised the annual cap on tuition fees⁴⁶ and cut most direct public funding for tuition. In the higher education sector, non-EEA nationals who do not have a “settled” status (i.e., no restrictions on how long they can stay in the United Kingdom) are charged higher fees than those who are EEA nationals.

D. The Implications of Institutional Instability and Complexity

As in many other countries, responsibilities for skills in the United Kingdom are split across multiple agencies, which have seen significant restructuring and change in response to the refocusing of skills policy.⁴⁷ Hence, the agencies currently playing a central role in the implementation of skills policy are relatively recent creations. The institutional instability and complexity of the workforce development system in England has thus caused some confusion for both individuals and employers.

There have been important recent developments in the welfare-to-work policy, as the Labour government’s “New Deal” initiatives (active labor market policies focusing on specific subgroups of unemployed people — such as the young, the elderly, ethnic minorities, etc.) have been abolished and replaced by the coalition government’s Work Program, a policy scheme that emphasizes the greater involvement of private-sector organizations operating on a payment-by-results model. From a skills development perspective, the significance of this change lies in a move away from a predominant focus on “any job” or “work first” to a focus on sustainable employment (i.e., ensuring that an individual can retain employment in the medium and long term — whether with one employer or by moving between jobs with different employers). This is likely to involve a greater emphasis on skills development.

There have also been important institutional changes at the regional and local levels since 2010, with the abolition of the regional tier of governance in England (including regional development agencies, which had responsibilities for promoting regional economic development and formulating regional skills policies) and the establishment of local enterprise partnerships (locally owned partnerships between local authorities and businesses playing a central role in determining local economic priorities, which in turn have implications for local skill needs). Local authorities remain in place but, along with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), they have seen cuts in public funding, which in turn have had consequences for service provision. This is significant because some local authorities and NGOs traditionally have played an active role in employability and skills development initiatives through the funding and delivering of projects that target skills among specific subgroups (including ethnic minorities and immigrants) and/or local areas.

44 Christopher N. Banks, *Independent Review of Fees and Co-funding in Further Education in England: Co-Investment in the Skills of the Future* (a report to ministers in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, London, 2010), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/further-education-skills/docs/1/10-1025-independent-review-fees-co-funding-fe-england.pdf.

45 BIS, *Attitudes to Further Education Loans* (London: BIS, 2012), www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32282/12-795-attitudes-to-further-education-loans.pdf.

46 To a maximum of GBP 9,000.

47 See Box 2 above, “Key Actors in the Skills System in England.”



Between 2010 and 2012, there was a reduction in career guidance services for individuals, with cut-backs in the number of organizations and personnel delivering such services. A National Careers Service, focusing on adults, was set up in April 2012 with funding from the central government's Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). It provides information, advice, and guidance — much of it through the Internet and a telephone helpline — on learning, training, and work opportunities.⁴⁸ While the greater use of technology to provide services may result in a cost savings, those who are unable to access a computer or to interpret the available information will be at a disadvantage.

Individuals' opportunities for training rest to a large extent on the skills development priorities of employers (rather than on government policy).

IV. Implications for Immigrants

Arrangements for funding English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses are of particular relevance to immigrants. The demand for ESOL provision has grown rapidly over the past decade. For instance, between 2001 and 2005 enrollment tripled, and government spending on ESOL increased at a proportionate rate in response to demand.⁴⁹ To control the disproportionate amount of total skills funding being spent on ESOL and to ensure provision was prioritized toward those who needed it most, automatic full-fee refunds for all ESOL provision ceased in 2006-07, when eligibility criteria were introduced. Full-fee remission remained for those receiving income-related benefits, but those ineligible for benefits were expected to cover the cost of their ESOL course themselves. In 2010 the coalition government reiterated that, while recognizing the importance of speaking English for gaining employment and contributing to society, people coming to work in England or their employers should meet the costs of ESOL courses. The rationale is that the UK taxpayer should not be asked to pay for free English language training for labor immigrants, and that companies that recruit from abroad must take full responsibility for their decision and any costs that result from it.

For immigrants (and other underutilized workers) the new focus areas and funding priorities of the workforce development system have several implications:

- ***Employers play a key role in immigrants' access to skills development.*** Because of the voluntary model and limited regulatory obligations for employers to train their staff,⁵⁰ workers have uneven prospects for skills development while in employment. This means that the individuals' opportunities for training rest to a large extent on the skills development priorities of employers (rather than on government policy).
- ***The individualistic and flexible nature of the VET system offers multiple access points for skills development (at least in theory).*** This is a positive feature for those who have the resources and tenacity to find out about and pursue opportunities.

48 National Careers Service, "National Career Service Home," accessed October 7, 2013, <https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>. The National Careers Service website hosts job profiles, a menu-driven list of courses available (organized by course and by training provider), and advice on specific topics (e.g., returning to work after having children, being an older worker, etc.) and on how to prepare curricula vitae. Of course, outside of the formal VET system, social networks of friends and family, together with employers (for those in employment) play a role in stimulating (or negating) individual demand for skills.

49 BIS, *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Equality Impact Assessment* (London: BIS, 2011), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/e/11-1045-english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-equality-impact.

50 Except in those instances where licensing of organizations/individuals is a legal requirement.



- ***The workforce development system is difficult to navigate.*** This is true for individuals and employers alike, but may disproportionately impact immigrants. Those immigrants who pursue skills development may be frustrated by the lack of a clear path to follow.
- ***Individuals need to invest their own resources to participate in skills development.*** Except for those receiving unemployment benefits and actively seeking work, individuals must increasingly rely on their own funds or on loans to pay for training. Some immigrants may not have the funds and/or inclination to invest in skills development.

A. (Lack of) Targeting

With the exception of refugees, government funding has not concentrated specifically on training for immigrants. Given the politics surrounding immigrants there is little appetite to do so except in very specific occupations that face a skill shortage.

Since 1979 (and until very recently) government funding for VET training had not targeted specific sectors or occupations; rather, the emphasis had been on interventions such as investing in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. However, recent skills policies have increasingly focused on apprenticeships that provide training in accordance with sectoral and occupational frameworks (offering funding and promoting opportunities). These are by nature more concentrated in sectors such as construction and engineering (in which ethnic minority groups are underrepresented).⁵¹ There has been funding for the Growth and Innovation Fund and the Employer Investment Fund, which are based on bids from employers or employer groups to promote skills development. This marks a shift toward greater interest in the sectoral targeting of policy (i.e., an emphasis on workforce skills development with a specific sectoral focus) as part of an industrial strategy focused on promotion of specific sectors — such as advanced manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, etc.⁵²

The United Kingdom, which has traditionally supported broad-based policies over more targeted ones, seems to be moving in the direction of greater sectoral targeting.

The UK government has announced a commitment to building and maintaining partnerships with key sectors in which there is likely to be increasing domestic and global demand, and which have been identified as being of strategic importance to the United Kingdom. Such sectors include advanced manufacturing, particularly aerospace, automotive, and life sciences; knowledge-intensive traded services, particularly professional/business services, the information economy, and traded aspects of higher and further education; and industries such as energy.⁵³ While these sectors tend to be particularly dependent upon high-level skills produced by higher education institutions, they also depend on skills typically produced through vocational pathways and further education, including apprenticeships.

In summary, the United Kingdom, which has traditionally supported broad-based policies over more targeted ones, seems to be moving in the direction of greater sectoral targeting.

51 At least in part, the underrepresentation of individuals from ethnic minority groups in apprenticeships is a function of their geographical concentration in London, where the uptake of apprenticeships is lower than average — which in turn is a function of the sectoral profile of employment in London. See Alison Fuller and Gayna Davey, *Equality and Human Rights Commission Triennial Review: Education (Lifelong Learning)* (London: Equality Groups and Apprenticeships, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010), www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/triennial_review/triennial_review_apprenticeship.pdf.

52 A sector-based industrial strategy has not been the norm in UK policy.

53 HM Treasury and BIS, *The Path to Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth* (London: HM Treasury and BIS, 2010), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BIScore/corporate/docs/P/10-1296-path-to-strong-sustainable-and-balanced-growth.pdf; HM Treasury and BIS, *The Plan for Growth* (London: HM Treasury and BIS, 2012), http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/2011budget_growth.pdf.



B. Access to Training by Establishment Size, Sector, and Occupation

The 2011 UK Commission's *Employer Skills Survey* (ESS) provides insight into trends in employer investment in training and workforce development.⁵⁴ This survey does not include information disaggregated by immigrant status, nationality, or ethnic group, but it does provide a detailed picture of training and workforce development in aggregate, and by establishment size, sector, and occupation.

The 2011 ESS revealed that around two-thirds of workplaces (66 percent) had provided on- or off-the-job training⁵⁵ for some of their staff in the previous 12 months (the definition of training adopted in the ESS is broad and covers mandatory and discretionary training).⁵⁶ The survey results suggest that just over half of the total workforce in England had received training; the average was 4.4 training days per employee per year and 8.3 days per person trained.

The likelihood of training varies by establishment size. Whereas 52 percent of establishments with fewer than five staff members provided training, 78 percent of those with 5-24 staff provided training. In establishments with 25 or more staff, more than 90 percent of staff received some kind of training.

In aggregate, immigrants and foreign nationals are not disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of training by their occupational profile of employment.

Variations in training by sector are in part driven by establishment size. Sectors with the smallest proportion of establishments in which training occurred include agriculture (51 percent); construction (56 percent); and transport and communications, hotels and restaurants, wholesale and retail, and manufacturing (around 60 percent). The incidence of training is highest in predominantly public-sector services dominated by relatively large establishments, such as health and social work (89 percent), education (88 percent), and public administration (85 percent). Staff employed in health care, leisure, and other service roles are the occupational group most likely to be trained (70 percent). The next most likely are those in professional occupations (57 percent). Those in managerial roles are least likely to have received training (44 percent), just slightly below the proportion in administrative and clerical occupations and machine operators (45 percent). Foreign nationals are disproportionately concentrated in service and professional occupations (with a relatively high incidence of training) and in machine operative roles (with a relatively low incidence of training). This suggests that, in aggregate, immigrants and foreign nationals are not disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of training by their occupational profile of employment.

The data presented above do not provide details about the nature or intensity of the training within sectors and occupations. Evidence from ESS suggests that intrasectoral and intraoccupational variations might be significant. Establishments at the “higher” end of the market⁵⁷ are more likely to train their staff and to

54 Ben Davies, et al., *UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2011: UK Results Evidence Report 45* (Wath-upon-Deane, UK: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2012), www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/ukces-employer-skills-survey-11.pdf.

55 Off-the-job training occurs away from the individual's immediate place of work, whether on the premises, or elsewhere. On-the-job training encompasses informal training or development at the individual's workplace, which would be recognized as training. Either type of training may or may not lead to formal qualifications. Thirteen percent of establishments provided only off-the-job training, 19 percent provided only on-the-job training, 34 percent provided both off- and on-the-job training, and 34 percent did not provide any training. There has been a general shift in the balance of on-the-job training and off-the-job training toward the former, particularly in smaller establishments. A minority of employers that train (46 percent, equivalent to 30 percent of all employers) had funded or arranged training that was intended to lead to a nationally recognized qualification.

56 In the analogous National Employer Skills Survey of 2009, the percentage recorded was 68 percent, indicating a reduction in training between 2009 and 2011. See Shury, Vivian, Davies, and Gore, *UK Employer Perspectives Survey 2010*.

57 Defined by a firm's product market strategy positioning. This is assessed by a combination of how customized an establishment's output is, how price dependent its offerings are, how innovative the establishment is, and whether products and services are premium or basic quality.



provide broader professional development. Establishments at the lower end of the market tend to require fewer skills of staff, being more focused on mass production and value and less on innovation and quality. For this reason, the staffers (including immigrants) in establishments at the lower end of the market are likely to miss out on training. Specific policy concerns arise if immigrant employment in effect sustains a low skills equilibrium — meaning that more immigrants are employed in low-skilled jobs by employers competing in low-skilled product markets with little incentive to up-skill their workforce. In such instances immigrants will be unlikely to have opportunities for skills development at the behest of their employers. A self-perpetuating cycle may ensue, as immigrants get stuck in low-paid, low-skilled jobs.

The 2011 ESS also reveals that a majority of employers choose not to align their training with the central government's skills and qualifications system: only a minority of employers (46 percent of those who train their workers, equivalent to 30 percent of all employers) had funded or arranged training that was intended to lead to a nationally recognized qualification (regardless of whether it did, in fact, lead to that qualification being obtained or not). This reiterates the important role played by the employer in determining both native-born and immigrant workers' opportunities for skills development. For workers participating in training that is not making use of government funding or not working toward a nationally recognized qualification, formal eligibility conditions for training access are of limited relevance.

C. Barriers to Access

Immigrants form a heterogeneous group that includes refugees and economic migrants with a diverse range of work experience, qualifications, skills, and English language expertise. Some immigrants face multiple barriers in accessing skills development provision, whereas others face very few or none. For example, some immigrants may lack English language expertise, transportation to courses, care for dependents while at a course, and confidence to engage in learning.

Barriers to access⁵⁸ fall into three main categories:

- **Institutional barriers**, including lack of provision of appropriate courses (e.g., a lack of English language courses and/or computing courses for individuals, a lack of specific engineering courses required by employers) and lack of support structure, including the provision of information and advice (i.e., courses may exist, but individuals may not recognize them as appropriate for their chosen career path).
- **Situational barriers**, including being in low-skilled, low-paid employment or having uncertain hours of work (making attendance at training courses difficult); challenges in travelling to training courses; lack of appropriate care provision (e.g., for children and other dependents) at times when courses are provided; and a lack of the necessary English language skills to participate in learning.⁵⁹
- **Dispositional barriers**, including a low priority afforded to learning/skills development (for whatever reason), a mismatch between what is believed to constitute “proper” learning and the types of skills development opportunities available, and negative perceptions of the relevance of certain types of learning if they are not linked to increases in pay, and so on.

58 Note that these barriers to access are not exclusive to immigrants, although they may be felt more keenly by them. See Pamela Clayton, *Vocational Guidance and Inclusion in Lifelong Learning* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, undated), www.academia.edu/356778/Vocational_Guidance_and_Inclusion_In_Lifelong_Learning. For further details see the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK: The Challenges of Accessing Education and Employment* (Leicester, UK: NIACE, 2009), www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/91-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk.pdf; Stephen McNair, *Migration, Communities and Lifelong Learning*, IFLL Thematic Paper 3, Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2009), http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/I/F/IFLL-Migration-web_2.pdf.

59 There is no definitive evidence on the extent to which there is a lack of necessary English language skills to participate in learning; the level of understanding of English, and of written English, will vary from course to course.



These barriers often mean that those most in need of education and skills development are least likely to participate.

V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The skills system in England is institutionally complex. This complexity poses challenges for all individuals and employers, but it affects immigrants in particular since they may have less knowledge than others of how to navigate the system. The situation calls for information, advice, and guidance. Yet in the context of austerity and associated reductions in public funding, there have been cuts to advice services in general, including those for refugees.⁶⁰ Cuts in training budgets within public authorities have had the effect of reducing equality and diversity knowledge and expertise. Some staff possessing such knowledge have been made redundant. Other staff members are increasingly stretched in their roles and may not have the time or experience to address the challenges faced by immigrants. Important regional infrastructure and locally based support and advocacy organizations have been hard hit during the recession and by associated austerity measures.⁶¹ The voluntary and community sector, which has traditionally played an important role in providing support to immigrants, has been impacted by increased demand in the wake of cut-backs in other services and by reductions in the availability of public funding (especially from small-scale grants).⁶² Hence, there is less assistance available from civil society than before to support immigrants in navigating their way through the skills development system. This, in turn, is likely to impact their propensity to take up training opportunities.

A. Responses to Diversity

English language skills are of fundamental importance to gaining employment, sustaining employment, and progressing in employment. Despite official and widespread recognition of this, there have been moves to control the costs of ESOL provision.⁶³ The transfer of more of the costs of ESOL provision to individuals — such that some individuals who might formerly have qualified for fee refunds no longer do so — has raised concerns about affordability (especially for those in low-paid employment),⁶⁴ and about the longer-term impact of a reduction in individuals' ability to access other forms of learning/skills development because of either a lack of competence or a lack of confidence in English language skills.⁶⁵

Alongside shortcomings in English language skills, and especially in vocational English, another key barrier to progress in the labor market is nonrecognition of qualifications, skills, and experience gained

60 Shamit Saggarr and Will Somerville, *Building a British Model of Integration in an Era of Immigration: Policy Lessons for Government* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/UK-countrystudy.pdf.

61 Brenda Weston, "Race in the South West: More or Less Equal?" (Summary of a June 2012 roundtable discussion convened by Equality SouthWest and Black South West Network, Bristol, UK), www.equalitysouthwest.org.uk/downloads/generate/2292.

62 An online survey of refugee community organizations by the Refugee Council in September 2010 revealed that 39 percent had seen a decrease in funding in the past financial year and 58 percent expected a decrease in funding in the next financial year. Seventy-seven percent of respondents were concerned that their capacity to deliver services would worsen in the next financial year. (These findings should be regarded as indicative, but they are illustrative of concerns about the impact of reductions in public funding on services). See Refugee Council, *The Impact of the Spending Cuts on Refugee Community Organizations* (London: Refugee Council, 2010), www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/5813/Briefing_-_impact_of_spending_cuts_on_RCOs_22_1010.pdf.

63 There has been a move within immigration policy to place greater requirements on competence in the English language on non-European Economic Area (EEA) immigrants to the United Kingdom.

64 McNair cites an October 2008 Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) study on the quality of ESOL provision that reported a drop in individuals' enrolment in ESOL courses following the introduction of new fee policies, implying employer resistance to paying for ESOL for employees. See McNair, *Migration, Communities and Lifelong Learning*.

65 Jenny Phillimore, *New Migrants and Lifelong Learning: Impacts, Gaps and Opportunities* (Birmingham, UK: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham, undated), www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/docs/Jenny-Phillimore-migration-evidence.pdf.



outside the United Kingdom.⁶⁶ Indeed, work undertaken by the Progress GB Development Partnership⁶⁷ between 2004 and 2007 highlights this barrier. The partnership piloted new approaches to improve life-long learning and employment opportunities in order to enhance the careers and integration of refugees and migrants in the UK labor market and the wider society. While running pilot initiatives, it concluded that there was a need to get recognition for the existing skills and qualifications of participants (e.g., by translating them into UK equivalents). The partnership concluded that, ideally, refugees and migrants would be provided with work experience, mentoring, and job coaching as part of a comprehensive learner-centered package of learning and support. While this would help refugees and migrants in the short, medium, and longer term, it would mean greater short-term investment from employers and support organizations than is currently the case (even where employers could benefit in the longer term).

The transfer of more of the costs of ESOL provision to individuals... has raised concerns about affordability.

A lack of UK work experience is another potential barrier faced by immigrants. The National Recognition Information Center for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC)⁶⁸ provides advice and guidance on international education and training systems and on non-UK skills and qualifications, including “translations” of non-UK qualifications to the UK system for a fee. Work experience outside the United Kingdom is more difficult to validate, but the information held by UK NARIC on relevant third-country contexts may be helpful here. Appropriate work placements for refugees and migrants can be difficult to find,⁶⁹ and some individuals may volunteer in order to build up their experience in the United Kingdom.⁷⁰

B. Individualization and Flexibility in Delivery

Moving away from mandatory programs that target subgroups of the unemployed, the general trend of active labor policy is toward greater individualization (focusing on an individual’s demonstrable needs instead of categories like age, ethnicity, or gender) and flexibility in delivery. Instead of prescriptive programs in which all individuals have to follow the same steps in the same order, the individual — often with a personal adviser — formulates an action plan to address his or her own needs. Theoretically, such an approach is better suited to immigrants (who are themselves heterogeneous) than a more prescriptive universal approach. Research on what works in active labor market policy for different subgroups of the population has shown that ethnic minority program participants tend to place particular value on contact with personal advisers.⁷¹ However, this approach requires advisers’ knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by immigrants in accessing the labor market and of the support available to them, in order to signpost individuals to appropriate support. In practice, the extent to which advisers have such knowledge and understanding varies. Third-sector organizations play an important role here — sometimes as subcontractors — in providing such support (though, as noted above, austerity has impacted their services).

66 Sue Waddington, *Routes to Integration and Inclusion: New Approaches to Enable Refugee and Migrant Workers to Progress in the Labour Market* (Leicester, UK: Progress GB NIACE, 2008), <http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/R/o/Routes-Integration-Inclusion.pdf>.

67 The partnership consisted of 11 organizations based in seven regions of England. It worked with 700 refugees and migrants over a period of three years.

68 ECCTIS, “UK NARIC,” accessed October 7, 2013, www.naric.org.uk

69 Finding work placement is an issue more generally in the United Kingdom, but is likely to impact immigrants in particular.

70 NIACE, *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK*.

71 See Chris Hasluck and Ann Green, *What Works for Whom? A Review of Evidence and Meta-Analysis’ for the Department for Work and Pensions*, Research Report 407 (London: UK Department for Work and Pensions, 2007), www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2007/hasluck_and_green_2007_rrep407.pdf.



C. Policy Recommendations

Any policy recommendations need to take into consideration the predominantly demand-led nature of UK labor migration policy, with the PBS focusing on specific categories of skilled non-EEA migrants to meet specific needs of the UK economy, coupled with a lack of control over labor migration within the European Union. The employer-led and voluntary nature of the workforce development system, combined with cutbacks in public spending, means there is little appetite for policy recommendations that involve additional spending on immigrants.⁷² Rather, it makes sense for recommendations to go with the grain of current policy. This means facilitating the operation of a VET market in which local provision of VET is shaped by employer and individual demand.

The optimal operation of a market rests on good and timely information. Given the institutional instability of key actors in the VET system and ongoing discussion of reforms to the education system, guidance in navigating the workforce development system is very important. It is recommended that the National Careers Service cater to the needs of immigrants (along with all other individuals) and that public-sector bodies and civil society organizations be active in collecting and disseminating information on opportunities for learning/workforce development and advising individuals on available support both within and among organizations. This means that it is necessary to continue to maintain and increase advisers' awareness of diversity.

A recurring theme of this report has been that individuals' opportunities for skills development in the workplace are shaped to a great extent by the employer. The employer plays a central role in how existing skills are valued and utilized, and in creating opportunities for skills development. The availability of training varies across sectors, occupations and establishments, and employers' market strategies play an important role. This highlights the crucial role of demand, and national policy is focused increasingly on raising employer demand for skills. This should benefit not only immigrants with underutilized skills, but all workers whose skills are underutilized. Current initiatives and policies focused on raising the demand for skills need to encourage employers to address the barriers immigrants face in translating their qualifications, skills, and experience to the UK labor market.

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While the emphasis of policy is on encouraging employers to move up the value chain, it remains the case that the labor market may not demand higher-level skills. At the lower end of the labor market, policies to promote a living wage are appropriate. So, too, are general policies that encourage individuals to take advantage of loans, where feasible, to enhance their skills — and to seek other opportunities in the labor market that enable them to better utilize, and develop, their skills.

⁷² This contrasts with systems, such as the Canadian one, that focus more support specifically on immigrants.



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