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Learning to manage? The experiences of managers undergoing training in a Scottish college

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Background

In Scotland the importance of workplace and lifelong learning for creating both economic growth and an inclusive society has been emphasised by the Scottish Government's Skills Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007). The Skills Strategy states that, compared to the UK average, Scotland has suffered from low productivity and low economic growth and that developing the skills of the labour force is a critical part of reversing these trends. The strategy asks all learning and training providers to provide learning at times and places accessible to those in work, emphasise employability in their provision and to partner with employers so that learners can use the skills they have gained to enter and progress in employment. However research on Scottish employers has found that private training providers are more widely used than colleges are (Scottish Government, 2009) and that employers found college courses inflexible (Futureskills, 2007).

Research in England found that staff within SMEs who had received management training performed better than those without training (Marshall et al, 1995). Disputing this, Westhead and Storey suggest that the outcomes from management training are mixed due to the diversity of learning programmes offered and that the qualitative outcomes from management training are under reported (Westhead & Storey, 1996). This paper explores the initial findings of a currently ongoing research project into learners' experience of management training.

Research Questions

The research focuses on the impact of management training upon learners and explores their experiences, through which the following questions will be considered:

- 1. What were the outcomes of the management training from the learners' point of view?
- 2. What were the qualitative outcomes from the training which the learners believed were significant?
- 3. What do the experiences of managers reveal about the ability of Scotland's colleges to provide useful training for managers within SMEs?

Methods

The research was undertaken as part of the larger EU funded Skills for Scotland Project. Questions asked here are drawn from the overall project which aims to explore the process of developing learning tailored to those in the workplace and to understand its impact upon learners.

Delivered by a college on the east coast of Scotland, the training programme under examination was a Personal Development Award in Management, attended by mid level managers over three months, comprising five full day sessions with additional reflective practice tasks. Content was taken from the Higher in Personal Development overseen by the Scottish Qualifications Agency. Topics covered personal history and goals, communication styles, negotiation of work tasks and supervision.

The research was conducted using a number of methods. Course materials and other documents were reviewed and analysed. The researcher acted as a participant observer during one day of the training. Learners were interviewed about their experiences after completing the course. These totalled to thirteen interviews (seven female, six male and ages ranged from early 20s to late 40s).

Seven further interviews were conducted with the line managers/employers of those who had taken the course. Follow up interviews with the learners were also conducted six months after they completed the training.

Frame

The data from the course materials, participant observation notes and interviews were analysed using a thematic approach. The interviews have been completed recently and the written transcripts were read to determine content and experiences related to the research questions outlined above, to the policy priorities of the Scottish Government and for common themes that emerge amongst the respondents.

Research findings

At present the data has only undergone preliminary analysis and the findings are initial and subject to addition.

- 1. What were the outcomes of the management training from the learners' point of view?

Participants reported an almost wholly positive experience of the course. Learners' positive outcomes included a greater awareness of assertive, passive and aggressive behaviours and use of more anticipatory and active communication strategies with both supervisees and line managers. A greater ability to delegate and negotiate on the taking on of additional tasks was also reported.

- 2. What were the qualitative outcomes from the training which the learners believed were significant?

A theme emerged among some learners who reported that their job roles were at times unstructured, with a lack of direction and communication from their own line managers. It was expressed that the course had helped them continue to operate within such a work structure. Other benefits were an enhanced awareness of the differing learning styles of those they worked with and a capacity to adapt their own communication style to better suit those they were directing in their management role. Better interpersonal skills were also reported for example through staying calm and focussing on solutions during difficult, confrontational discussions and greater assertiveness with supervisees and their own line managers. Such changes made a positive difference to learners' perception of their own job skill.

- 3. What do the experiences of managers reveal about the ability of Scotland's colleges to provide useful training for managers within SMEs?

The fundamental approach of the course was praised, especially as it was felt that the course content met the challenge of being largely relevant for all of the learners, who were from in a diverse set of occupational areas. Some questioned the relevance of content on personal biography within a course primarily aimed at improving work skills. However a strongly held minority view was that the personal content meant that the course engaged learners as complete individuals rather than only as compartmentalised employees. All participants were unclear about how and if their course would be accredited and how to build on their award to a more recognised qualification, reflecting the difficulty of producing formal qualifications for work related learning.

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