The Skills Agenda: Great Britain vs. the United States

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The Skills Agenda: Great Britain vs. the United States

Jennifer Brownett
November, 2006
I. Overview

Skills are the basis for any job, and the right combination of skills are needed for any organization or industry to function. But, how a government is able to form a workforce with, not only basic working skills, but also the right combination of skills to sustain the nation’s industries is always a challenge, the Skills Challenge. In spring 2006, I participated in an internship program in London. During my internship at a small company called Networking for Industry (NFI), I worked closely with the Skills Group, which tries to inform both Great Britain’s government and businesses about the challenges and opportunities to improve skills. Based on my background knowledge from my work at NFI, I want to investigate exactly what the British government is currently doing to meet the Skills Challenge. Upon my return to the States, I have investigated the United States’ current programs that attempt to meet the skills challenge. By comparing these two countries my objective is to answer the following question – How can these governments effectively use education and training to increase its workforce vocational skills? Vocational skills are any skills that are needed for either general or specific employment, while vocational training is any sort of training that can teach these skills. The other types of skills that will be mentioned are basic skills, which are the basic understandings of English and math.

Before answering the question, one must first understand why there is a need for increased workforce skills. In articles discussing skills shortages, several reasons are given for the difference between the skills level of the workforce and the skills levels required by employers. These reasons include changes in employers needs, such as technological changes, as well as poor education. Several groups are also highlighted as lacking skills including young workers, workers with only a high school degree or less, older workers, and disadvantage
minorities. However, despite the reason or affected group, employers in both Great Britain and the United States seem to complain most about a lack of basic skills and life skills, which include communications, teamwork, management and leadership skills. Overall, there is a variety of factors that are causing workforce skills to fall short of employers needs.

To answer the stated objective, three key areas will be examined for each country – educational strategies for young adults, vocational training for adults and employers training employees. Within the educational strategies for young adults, program changes within the education system for 14-19 years as well as post-secondary education will be discussed. The vocational training for adults will then be reviewed. These sections will also include a brief discussion on training for ethnic minorities and a section on training for women. Finally, the employers sections will discuss programs that the governments are using to encourage employers to train their employees. The conclusion of each section will discuss general observations and recommendations for improvement. It should be noted that since my focus is on government initiatives, only government-run (either nationally or locally) programs will be discussed, however similar programs do exist in the private non-profit sector.

Once both countries have been discussed I will then compare and contrast the two countries’ strategies. By comparing the two strategies, I will demonstrate what types of programs are more appropriate to meeting the skills challenge. I will conclude with some general recommendations for how governments in general can create a workforce with the appropriate skills.

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II. Great Britain’s Skills Agenda

1. Introduction

To fully understand what is being done to meet the Skills Challenge in Great Britain, one should first look at what the British government says it is doing. The best sources are the White Papers that the British government publishes when putting new policies in place. Specifically for this investigation, White Papers such as *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*, *The Future of Higher Education and Skills*, *14-19 Education and Skills* and *21st Century Skills: Realizing Our Potential* proved to be the most vital. The White Papers *Further Education, The Future of Higher Education, and 14-19 Education* all discuss the government’s current plan to improve the skills of young adults with in the ages of 14-25. The White Paper, *21st Century Skills* discusses the Government’s initiative to help individual adults as well as encouraging employers to train their employees. Besides government reports, one should also look at outside groups. One outside group I utilized was the skills group that I work with at NFI. In the last year, this group as published several reports on what is being done in various areas of the skills agenda. Additionally, for the most up-to-date information, newspapers and magazines are excellent sources for recent discussions on the issues.

All of the sources that are listed above proved to be incredibly useful to understand what is currently going on in the skills debate. The government reports were excellent for providing a background for what the Government is and plans on doing to help increase skills. Recently published articles in newspapers also were vital to understand the discussion around the Government’s plans and to give an idea about the Government’s future intentions as they often discuss anticipated plans what will appear in future reports. The most difficult challenge with
these sources, however, is that most are relatively new. Normally, most of the Government’s White Papers are only printed every few years. But, most of the reports utilized in this project were published between 2005 and early 2006. The newness of these reports made finding copies of them slightly difficult as hard copies are not readily available. However, the Government does post the reports on the publishing department’s website almost as soon as they are printed. Thus, websites such as the Department of Education and Skills’ website proved invaluable to find these reports. Like the reports, many of the newspapers articles utilized for this project have also been published in the last several months. Because of this, newspapers needed to be checked on a regular basis to fully understand current debates and issues surrounding the skills agenda.

Based on the information found mainly in the sources listed above, as well as a few other supporting sources, this section will attempt to explain and examine Great Britain’s current skills agenda. The objective is to identify whether the skills agenda can help increase needed vocational skills and training.
2. Educational Strategies for Young Adults

While vocational skills can be taught later in life, teaching such skills while students are in school provides two key benefits. The first is that young adults will already have these skills upon entering the work force. The second is that by teaching key, transferable skills in school, less retraining is needed when changing jobs. The British government is currently focusing on two main age groups – 14 to 19 year olds and university age students. But while the government has recently established plans to help ensure that young adults leave secondary school and university with the appropriate skills, the question still remains – will these plans actually work?

2.1 Educating 14 to 19 Year Olds

In 1994, the Education Committee published the report *Education and Training for 14 to 19 Year Olds*. Within the introduction of this report, the committee stated that 70% of 16 year olds remained in full-time education. Despite a high participation rate, the committee expressed concern that, while the number of students who continued in full-time education has risen, the number has risen slowly. Beyond just numbers, the committee also expressed concerns about the level of skills. By 2003, the number of 16 year olds in some education or training had risen to 87%, but the level of skills and the extent to which these skills match the need of the economy still remained a legitimate concern.

To address the skills issue, the Government published 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper in February 2006. Within the report, the Government expressed the need to increase basic skills in English and math. As a means to increase these skills, the Government intends to make the basics of these areas a key focus of the curriculum and to restructure the GCSEs and A-level

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exams that students must take at the end of their secondary education to ensure that no student can receive a passing grade without the appropriate level of skills. But how this restructure will come about is not yet known. However, the White Paper report did call for several new types of education – trust schools, National Skills Academies, and specialized diplomas. All of these have begun to be implemented.⁴

• ‘Trust’ Academies

The first major change that the government is currently implementing is a fundamental change in the system of some schools. As part of Prime Minster Tony Blair’s new education policy, 200 privately-sponsored, or ‘trust’, academies are to be created by 2010. Basically, to begin an academy, a sponsor must first raise £2 million in start-up costs. The Government will then fund the rest of the start-up costs which, on average, are estimated to be £25 million. Currently, the Government hopes to attract sponsors such as churches and non-profit organizations. However, a concern has arisen that by providing such a large sum of money, the sponsors will be given a large amount of control over a school’s curriculum, selection of staff and the schools ethos. With such influence, concern has also arisen about the quality of the schools. Perhaps, these concerns are, in fact, rather well founded. Some of the first academies were founded in 2002. Already, barely four years after their foundation, many of these academies have been criticized by inspectors for their low standards. In March, the inspectors found the standards of one academy, the West London Academy in Ealing, to have ‘inadequate’ achievement and standards. Other academies were also found to be inadequate, including the Academy at Peckham in South London and the Business Academy in Bexley, Kent. Among the

criticisms, inspectors did note that many of these academies had improved since the last inspection in 2005\(^5\). Thus, the question must be asked. Are these academies simply new and still trying to work out the inadequacies in their system or does the idea of privately sponsored academies simply not work in practice?

While it is entirely plausible that these academies are a new idea and simply trying to fix the inadequacies in their system, a few points do suggest that, perhaps, these academies are not the best for improving the basic skills of 14 to 19 year olds. The first is that these new privately sponsored academies can be sponsored by those with an inability to set-out and run a school. Now, it should be assumed that the sponsors will attempt to hire staff who are adequately equipped to run a school. However, given the inexperience of some of the sponsors, the staff chosen may not be the best qualified. Thus, the overall quality of the school is not expected to be high. A second point should be made that while some academies are on their way to being successful and to having high standards, the process of attaining these standards is somewhat long. After four years, some of the original privately-sponsored academies are still struggling to reach adequate standards. While the academies may reach these standards eventually, many of the students who attend the academies before such standards are reached will be made to suffer inadequate secondary schooling and be put at a disadvantage. Even if their skills level is the same as everyone else entering secondary school, one can assume that a poor secondary education will not help to push them to a higher level of skills that students attending better performing schools will achieve. Unfortunately, given the number of academies that are to be opened, one can assume that the number of students subjected to these low standards will be in the thousands. Now, the government has put in place a policy to help avoid failing schools –

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every failing school has one year to turn around or face closure. But, 85% of head teachers stated that turning a school around in just one year is very unreasonable.\(^6\) Thus, the schools will mostly likely argue to be given more time and thus try to remain open.

Given these inadequacies, the Government needs to seriously examine the expectations of these privately-sponsored academies. For one, the Government needs to lay down strict curriculum and staffing guidelines to ensure congruency throughout the education system. Also, by implementing stricter standards, the Government will be forcing the academies to improve quickly and greatly, providing for more immediate high standards. However, the Government must allow sponsors some concrete say in the schools. Otherwise, potential sponsors will not be interested. Perhaps, allowing the sponsors to still choose their own staff within the guidelines, where the schools’ specialized areas lie and the extra-curricular activities that the school will promote will be a feasible and acceptable compromise.

Finally, the Government needs to seriously consider the fact many of the nation’s head teachers do not support the idea of trust schools. In fact, only 5% of secondary school head teachers have stated that they are definitely going to become a trust school and only 21% said they are considering the possibility\(^7\). How can the policy of trust schools help improve Great Britain’s youth’s education if the nation’s schools are not willing to go along with it? The answer is simple – it cannot work.

- National Skills Academies

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\(^7\) Ibid
The second major change that the Government is implementing is the introduction of National Skills Academies. While the sponsored academies focus on traditional education, these skill academies focus specifically on vocational skills. In March 2005, Education Secretary Ruth Kelly announced the Government’s initiative to begin 12 National Skills Academies by 2008 through a partnership of employers and Sector Skills Councils. Each academy will focus on a specific sector and will aim to teach its students specific skills relevant to that sector. In October 2005, the first four sponsors for these academies were chosen – Constructionskills, Financial Services, Improve (Food and Drink Manufacturing) and SEMTA (engineering and manufacturing). All four academies are to open in the fall of 2006.

As these academies have not been opened, their actual success can not yet be assessed. However, the premise of these skills academies does provide for a hopeful prediction. Because these academies are set up merely to teach skills specific to certain industries, the 14 to 19 year olds who attend these academies will be well equipped to enter into these industries and even some of the hard-to-fill positions. Also, because these academies are a partnership between employers and the Sector Skills Councils, one can expect that the curriculum will be matched to the specific skills needs of the industry. Thus, these academies can be expected to provide a knowledgeable and able work force for the industries that undertake them. Given the potential of these academies, the Government should continue to fund and promote these academies.

- Specialized Diplomas

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8 Sector Skills Councils are industry run councils that work to identify and improve skills gaps in their particular industry.

Finally, the Government is intending to introduce specialized diplomas in secondary schools. These specialized diplomas will each focus on different vocational discipline and will be earned through appropriate skills in English, math and specialized material in the specific area. Work experience will be required as well. By 2008, four of these diplomas will be introduced with focuses on information and communication technology, health and social care, engineering and creative and media. Four more specialized diplomas will be introduced by 2010 with a goal of offering fourteen specialized diplomas by 2015\textsuperscript{10}.

Though not yet implemented, these specialized diplomas already have a high chance of success. For example, employers will greatly support the diplomas which would allow students to leave their secondary education with a high level of skills in a specific field giving them a solid base for work and further learning. However, the diplomas do have one significant flaw. Already schools and employers fear that the students will not be able to gain the work experience that they will need to complete the degree. Currently, Ruth Kelly would like every student to have at least 10 days of work experience for every level of their course. However, employers have identified concerns about their capacity to take on students as well as issues of health and safety.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps, if employers and schools work more closely together and find a solution to these issues, then the specialized diplomas will be a success.

- Does the plan work?

Overall, the Government’s plan for the skills of 14-19 year olds works to ensure that youth not only have the necessary basic skills, but will be able to help fill some workforce skill needs.

\textsuperscript{10} DiES, \textit{14-19 Education and Skills}
Also, some of its current plans, such as the skills academies and the specialized diplomas have a high chance of succeeding in teaching vocational skills. Additionally, these plans will also be able to meet the specific needs of certain industries. However, the idea of the trust academies already has shown to be somewhat unsuccessful and has many flaws that do not make future improvements hopeful. Thus, these trust academies should be scratched while the rest of the plan moves forward.

2.2 Further and Higher Education

Traditionally, the main difference between Further and Higher Education has been that Higher Education focuses more on academic subjects such as English and philosophy. On the other hand, Further Education focuses on more vocational areas such as mechanics. However, the division between these two categories of post-secondary education is becoming blurred. In recent years, more students are beginning to study vocational areas of study such as business opposed to more traditional areas of study such as history. For example, in February 2006, students applying to study philosophy fell 3.9% while applications to study art history fell 10.1%.\(^{12}\) Statistics such as these demonstrate that more students are beginning to look at degrees that provide more relevant employment skills.

Under the new plan for Further and Higher Education, the Government’s aim is to have 50% of 18-30 year olds in some sort of Higher Education by 2010.\(^{13}\) As the graph below demonstrates, in general, participation in higher education has been gradually increasing since 1991.


But, in order to keep the participation in Higher Education increasing and achieve this goal of 50% participation, the Government is currently focusing on three main areas: decreasing the gap between the social classes, achieving stronger links with businesses and increasing funding for Further and Higher education\textsuperscript{14}. In order to examine these issues, two main initiatives must be discussed – foundation degrees and new finance and fees schemes.

• Foundation Degrees

The foundation degrees are intended to be work-focused, two-year degrees. Students may choose these degrees opposed to more traditional three-year degrees. In order to develop and manage these degrees, the Government has set up a network of universities called the ‘Foundation Degree Forward’. The government is also enlisting the help of employers to help develop these degrees to best meet their skills needs.\(^{15}\)

Overall, because the degrees focus is on the vocational skills rather than purely academics, these degrees will go along way to help universities deliver students with a high level of vocational skills that can be transferred instantly into the work force. Also, by including employers in the formation of these degrees, the government will begin to create stronger links with business. Additionally, these degrees will most likely have a high level of acceptance as many students are already turning to more vocational areas of study. Thus, the Government needs to push forward with this initiative.

• Finance and Fees

To help Further Education, the Government has promised an annual budget of £7 billion by 2008.\(^{16}\) This money is intended to help students pay for courses by waving fees for 19 to 25 year olds. Additionally, the funding is meant to help colleges better develop current and future courses. The level of funding that the Government has promised truly shows that the Government is serious about improving post-secondary education. If used as intended, this funding will go along way to achieving this goal.

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\(^{15}\) National Skills Forum

\(^{16}\) Smithers, Rebecca (23 March 2006). Package to give young adults a second chance. EducationGuardian.co.uk. Retrieved March 23, 2006 from http://education.guardian.co.uk/ further/story/0,,1737543,00.html
In an effort to help fund research and improvements for Higher Education universities, the Government is planning on increasing the funding for Higher Education 6% for the next three years. \(^{17}\) Also, the Government is looking to students to help pay some of the expense. As of September 2006, the Government will implement a £3000 per year top-up fee for university students. Already, many are afraid that this will discourage students from attending university. By January 2006, the National Union of Students reported a 3.4% drop in the number of applications for the fall opposed to the number of application received by January 2005 for that fall.\(^{18}\) If top-up fees are going to keep students from university, then the Government will certainly not reach its goal of 50% participation by 2010. Concerns have also arisen that the top-up fees are particularly keeping students from working-class families away. This certainly undermines the goal of decreasing the social gap in university participation. But, the Government has devised a scheme to help with these fees. Students only have to pay what they can up-front. Any additional fees will be waved until after graduation and the student is earning at least £15,000 per year. While this scheme will help students greatly, many students do not know about this option or any other options to help with funding. Therefore, if the Government is intent of having top-up fees, they need to put time into informing students about what is available to help students pay these fees.

- Life Skills

One area of skills that the Government has overlooked is life skills. Currently, half of Great Britain’s leading firms say that they will not be to fill all of their vacancies because of

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\(^{17}\) DfES, The Future of Higher Education

\(^{18}\) Top-up fees a ‘turn-off’ as applications drop (15 Feb 2006). EducationGuardian.co.uk. Retrieved March 7, 2006 from http://education.guardian.co.uk/universityaccess/story/0,,1710394,00.html
applicants’ poor life skills. Most notably, employers report problems with applicants’ appearances, team-work, leadership and communication skills.19 Either by integrating the teaching of these skills into current courses or by offering courses to help improve these skills, these important skills must be addressed and taught throughout a student’s academic career.

- The Plan Will Work

Thus far, the Government is on the right track to improve Further and Higher Education and thus ensuring that a portion of the workforce has higher level skills. New foundation degrees will certainly give students needed work force skills and the increased level of funding will help to make overall improvements. However, the Government needs to do two things to help increase post-secondary education participation and the level of needed skills. The first is that the Government needs to begin a campaign to inform students about their options to pay new top-up fees so that students will not be discouraged by the top-up fees. Finally, the Government needs to create some initiative to improve life skills as employers consistently complain that graduates are missing these vital skills that are greatly needed by employers.

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19 Hodges, Lucy (3 March 2006). Students get a lesson in social skills. EducationGuardian.co.uk. Retrieved March 15, 2006 from http://education.independent.co.uk/higher/article348593.ece
3. Vocational Training for Adults

According to the Department of Education and Skills, 75% of adults between the ages of 16 and 69 have participated in some sort of learning within the last three years. But despite a high participation rate, the government remains concerned about the general level of skills of the workforce. As can be seen in the chart below, 56.9% of the workforce is considered to have low skills, while only 15.4% are considered to have high skills. Thus, while many jobs that require lower level skills can be filled, jobs that require a higher level of skills may be difficult to fill.

![Percentage of workforce with qualifications at levels](image)


Besides the general concern about the level of skills, many people in need of training and education do need to seek it for a variety of reasons. For example, some people are concerned about the cost of taking a course, others are not convinced that courses offered are suitable for local job vacancies, and some are wary of training courses because they do not have a high level of basic skills, most notably reading and mathematics. In an effort to address these issues while trying to achieve an overall high level of vocational skills, the Government has developed

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20 Trends in Education and Skills
22 National Skills Forum
several programs, as well as several key information sources, to encourage and support various learners. But while these programs exist, there is still the question of their ability to be effective.

### 3.1 Available Programs

- **Skills for Life**

  One of the larger government programs to improve individual skills is the Skills for Life program. The main goal of this program is to improve overall adult literacy in the UK by focusing on basic language, reading and math skills. As part of the program, the Government aims to target the groups with the greatest needs for basic skills such as those who are constantly unemployed, prisoners or those in low-skilled work. In an effort to help these groups, as well as increase literacy in general, the Government has raised national standards to make higher skills mandatory, has improved teacher training and has created national inspections to ensure high standards and consistency. Overall, the Government hopes that 1.5 million adults will improve their basic skills by 2007.

  So far, the Government has been rather successful with this program. As part if this initiative, over a million adults participated in a literacy, numeracy or language course and 319,000 adults earned a qualification between April 2001 and July 2002. Truly, with this program, the Government has demonstrated its understanding that improving basic skills are essential to improving the overall quality of the national workforce’s skills. The Government has also shown that it understands what is needed to improve basic skills with such requirements

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24 DfES, 21st Century Skills

25 Ibid
as better teacher training and national inspections to ensure high standards. If the workings of the program remain solid, the Government should have no problem reaching its goal of 1.5 million adults with improved basic skills by 2007.

• IAG Services

In an effort to inform adults about what training and educational course are on offer to them, the Government has created a network of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Services for adults. Currently, this network is under the direction of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The LSC’s is aiming to create a link between these services and employers in order to link those who are seeking training and those that could possibly provide employment after training. Regional Skills Partnerships, which is a cooperation of various agencies dealing with local skills, is also evaluating the level of these services in various areas to ensure that the region is receiving the necessary services. The Government has also created two nationally available sources. The first is learndirect, which can be accessed by telephone or by its website. Learndirect’s main goal is to provide information and advice on learning opportunities for individuals. As of March 2006, learndirect has been able to provide 4 million courses via training centers or the internet to 1.7 million people. The second national source is Worktrain, which provides information on job opportunities as well as training opportunities for these jobs via the internet.

As regards to the IAG Services, the Government seems to be clear on who needs this information and how to make this information easily accessible. For example, learners can easily take courses via the internet with programs such as Worktrain rather than finding a

26 National Skills Forum
28 DfES, 21st Century Skills
training centre. Also, since employers have access to these programs, learners will already have a good source for locating employment after their training.

Despite the Government knowing what information to provide, how much use individuals are making of this information, or even whether individuals know these services exist, is questionable. In its report, *Skills: A Parliamentary Perspective*, the National Skills Forum reported that “the provision and potential support that is currently on offer to older learners is not marketed effectively: Members of Parliament complained that their constituents simply were not aware of the opportunities available to them.” Examine the effectiveness of *learndirect* for instance. To have offered 4 million courses is remarkable, yes, but to have only provided 4 million courses to 1.7 million people is not. Clearly, either a majority of people took several courses and/or the enrolment in several courses was quite small. Obviously, the key flaw with these services is not the services themselves, but the fact that no one knows about them.

- **Adult Learning Grants**

In effort to address concerns about the cost of taking training courses, the Government has introduced Adult Learning Grants for adults with low incomes. These Grants are offered to two groups of people. The first group is those over the age of 19 who wish to study full-time in order to achieve a first Level 2 qualification. The second group is those between the ages of 19 and 31 who wish to undertake a full-time course to achieve their first Level 3 qualification. The Grants provide the recipient with £30 per week to help with the cost of educational or vocational courses including the cost of books and transportation.

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29 Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to 5 good GCSEs; Level 3 qualifications are equivalent to 3 A levels.
30 National Skills Forum
Providing funding for those of lower incomes can go a long way in improving vocational skills. Often, those who earn lower incomes are in jobs with lower skills and, therefore, are in greater need of improving their skills. However, because of their low incomes, this group is also the least likely to try to improve their skills because they cannot afford classes to help them do so. Thus, the Adult Learning Grants can be very successful if the Government ensures that people are informed about and utilize this resource.

- The Probable Success of the Programs

Given the set-up of the programs discussed, all of the programs have the potential to be successful and help greatly in improving the vocational skills of the work force. However, in order for this potential to be fulfilled, the Government needs to better inform individuals of these programs existence. These programs cannot work if no one knows to utilize these resources.

3.3 Training for Ethnic Minorities

While ethnic minorities continue to become a larger percentage of Great Britain’s population, ethnic minorities are not a key item of Great Britain’s skills agenda. Even within the Government’s 2003 skills agenda report, 21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential, ethnic minorities are not mentioned specifically except for one or two pages. For the most part, ethnic minorities are greatly encouraged to participate in many of the individual training programs that the Government has set up. However, a few programs have been implemented to help these minority groups. The largest program is the English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL). The aim of this program is to help those who do speak English as a first language to increase their English language and literacy skills. However, while this program is necessary to help
many newly arrived ethnic minorities, the program does need to be highly publicized and more accessible. For example, the Department of Work and Pensions has found that in many Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, many people feel that there is little access to the ESOL program.  

Overall, the Government, while paying attention to ethnic minorities, needs to focus a little more on their needs. Encouraging ethnic minorities to participate in training programs is all well and good, but some emphasis does need to be put on issues with which ethnic minorities specifically deal.

3.4 Training for Women

One large section of the work force that has been greatly ignored is women. As of 2006, 70% of all women held some sort of employment while an additional 1 million women wanted to work and another 5.1 million in part-time work wanted to have more hours. Given these statistics, women clearly provide a large source of work-force potential. However, for the most part, no programs have been formed to specifically help women to improve their vocational skills. In fact, most women work in largely low-skilled and/or part-time work that may not appropriately utilize their skills and provide little room from improvement.

In February 2006, the Women and Work Commission published an important and highly anticipated report, Shaping a Fairer Future, which brought the plight of women to the forefront of Great Britain’s skills agenda. Within the report, the Commission outlined some of challenges that women face when returning to work or the classroom. The first challenge is that many women feel that they lack the confidence or skills necessary to re-enter the work force. A second

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31 National Skills Forum
challenge is that many women do not know the opportunities available to them in terms of employment. Finally, many women want more access to training and career support but are unsure about its availability and where to find information about it. All of these issues must be addressed if women are to fulfill their potential.

- **Recommended Improvements**

  In an effort to address the issues that women are facing, the Commission also made several suggestions in their report, three of which will be discussed. The first suggestion is to have the Sector Skills Councils and employers work together to create apprenticeships for women. These apprenticeships would provide practical work experience in a particular field allowing women to become fully competent in that area. Also, if the employers are from industries that are typically male-dominated, these apprenticeships would be an excellent opportunity for women to break into new industries.

  A second recommendation that the Commission has suggested is that a local approach is needed to address the major issues that women face. This local approach might include an advice and information center where women can go to receive information about training or job opportunities. Local schools or colleges might provide training courses for women. The benefits of having a local approach are that, for one, those who live in a given area would know the opportunities available better than those who do not and that women would not have to go very far to find information or take courses.

  A final recommendation by the Commission is a £20 million package to help raise the levels of women’s skills. The objective will be that women will have the necessary skills to change
careers or progress in the career that they are already in. As with many other programs funding is vital if the program is to be successful.

Beside the Commission’s suggestions, other organizations have made suggestions as well. For example, the London West Learning and Skills Council has suggested ‘confidence-building courses.’ Because women often lack confidence when re-entering the work-force or education, these course would be unaccredited courses that women can take to help boost their confidence. Such courses might include hair and beauty or techniques in helping children with homework. The Council also found that women who begin with unaccredited courses often went on to receive a qualification. One can assume that increased confidence also helped women perform better in their accredited courses as well. Thus, the idea of ‘confidence-builder courses’ would significantly help women return to the education system. Then, once they are again comfortable with a classroom setting, they will be able to pick up accredited courses with confidence.

- The Government’s Response

In response to the Women’s and Work Commission’s report, the Government has announced several initiatives to help women improve their skills. The first is creating a training pilot that would focus on helping women with a low level of skills. Another initiative is increased funding for the Sector Skills Councils to develop new methods to train and recruit women. With this added government support, the suggestions of the Commission will be able to greatly increase the skills of women in the long-run.

33 HM Treasury
• A Bright Future for Women

Overall, the Women and Work Commission seems to have identified very clearly the challenges that are facing women in or seeking employment. All of the suggestions that the Commission and other organizations have made seem to be right on track with what needs to be done to help these women. Additionally, the recently announced government support of these suggestions will only increase the likelihood that women’s skills will be increasing in the future.
4. Employers Training Employees

It is not enough for only individuals to take the initiative to increase their own skills. Employers must also train their employees and encourage employees to improve their skills. As of 2006, employers annually spend £23 billion a year on training-related activities for their employees.\(^{34}\) The Government has also created several programs to help employers fund this training for their employees. However, these programs must be examined to see whether employers are fully taking advantage of them and whether employers are given enough of a say to ensure that these programs produce candidates with skills that employers need.

4.1 Available Programs

- Employer Training Pilots

In an effort to promote employee training, the Government began the Employer Training Pilots in September 2002 in coordination with 6 different regional Learning and Skills Councils. The main aim of the program is to, not only meet the needs of the employees, but also to give employers a say in what skills they would like to see improve. Within the program, the Government provides a number of provisions to ensure these aims are met and help the employers with the cost of training. First, all training programs are free and support will be given to employers for lost work while the staff attended training. Second, the program provides information and advice for employers and learners about further opportunities. Finally, the program allows employers to voice what skills they think need to be improved to create the best match between what the employers need and the employees want.

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\(^{34}\) DfES, 21st Century Skills
To date, this program has been rather successful. In the first year alone, 2,000 employers and 10,000 learners participated in the program.\textsuperscript{35} Also, both employers and learners reported that they were enthusiastic about the training and the future benefits. The success of the program can be attributed to several of the programs attributes. The first attribute is that the program provides free training and compensation to employers for letting their staff go for the training. Sustaining in-house training is rather expensive and, for many small and medium size firms, out-of-house training can be even more expensive. Because of the cost involved, employers are not as likely to seek training for their employees. However, since the Employer Training Pilots offer not only free training, but also compensation for lost work, employers are more likely to agree to such a program. A second attribute of the programs is that employers are given a say about what type of training their employees receive. If employers are going to have someone train their employees, then employers need to ensure that what their employees learn is relevant to the company and industry. By allowing employers a say, the Employer Training Pilots almost ensure that employees will return with relevant skills.

- Investors in People

In a further effort to improve employee training, the Government has created a national recognition called the Investors in People. Founded in 1991, the aim of the program is to encourage employers to continually improve employee skills and performance. In order to achieve the recognition of an Investors in People organization, an organization must go through a three phase process. The first phase involves developing a strategy to improve performance. During this phase, the organization will be expected to clear define its strategy, create plans for

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid
learning and development, and design a managing strategy. During the second phase, the
organization is expected to take action to improve performance by ensuring that managers are
effective, and that people are being encouraged to take responsibility, are being recognized for
contributions and are learning. During the final phase, the organization must evaluate the impact
of the program on its performance and ensure that improvements will continually be made. A
review must take place every three years. It should also be mentioned that there is not set
method to complete any part of this program. Each organization may complete each stage in the
best way it sees fit.\footnote{36}

Thus far, the Government has been fairly successful with this program. By 2003, 28,000
organizations have been able to complete the program and achieve Investors in People status.
Another 16,000 organization were involved in the program and working towards this status.\footnote{37}
One positive aspect of the program is that since it involves some sort of distinction, the
distinction it gives could become quickly recognized by employers and employees alike. If more
people recognized the distinction, more companies would be willing to undertake the program to
ensure that they too have this distinction. Potential employees may also want to work for these
companies because they know that they will be able to develop their skills. That being the case,
employers will be given a further incentive to participate in the program. Also, since the
employers are not constrained to any set method, they are less likely to see the program as
burdensome.

\footnote{36} \textit{Investors in People}. Retrieved March 15, 2006 from www.investorsinpeople.co.uk
\footnote{37} DfES, \textit{21st Century Skills}
• Apprenticeships

As a final means to encourage employers to actively participate in training, the Government created an Apprenticeship program for 16 to 24 year olds. The program, led by the Learning and Skills Council, itself is a combination of on the job work experience and academic study. As needs for each industry varies, the curriculum is established by each industries individual Sector Skill Council to ensure that the industries’ needs are meet. Also, an apprentice may sign-up to be with an employer a certain period of time in order to complete some sort of qualification. Additionally, employers who are able to consistently take on apprentices may qualify for financial assistance for on-the-job costs and salaries. The program is currently operating in 47 local offices.\textsuperscript{38}

The Government has put a large amount of effort into this program and seems to want to continually do so. Since the program was initiated in 1994, over 1 million people have been able to participate. The Labor Party also pledged in 2005 to create an additional 300,000 Apprenticeships. The program will definitely help increase skills and employer participation for several reasons. To begin, skills will be able to increase greatly among younger people. With the hands on experience, these young people will be much better equipped to work in the given industry opposed to those who learning has been purely academic. This increase in skills is actually an incentive for employers to participate in the program. If employers know that by participating in the program, there will be several people in the future with the right set of skills, then employers will want to participate. Another incentive is that, because employers help create

\textsuperscript{38} National Skills Forum
the curriculum, they are ensuring that there will be people with the appropriate skills in the future.

- Functioning without Participation

This section has described several Government programs aimed at increasing employer participation in improving vocational skills. Every program appears solid and functional as well as provides incentives for employers to want to participate. However, for these programs to be successful, large numbers of employers must participate. While every program has shown a good level of participation, more participation is still needed. A half-hearted participation on the part of the employers will not allow these programs to function. As the chat below demonstrates, already MPs are concerned that Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are not doing enough, let alone large companies.

![Bar chart showing MPs' perception of SMEs' engagement in training]

Information Source: *Skills: A Parliamentary Perspective*, National Skills Forum

4.2 Sources of Information

In order to provide employers with information about the programs described above, the Government has developed publications to help carry the information. The first publication is the *Employer Guide to Good Training*. This guide, published by a local Learning and Skills Council, provides information on the quality of local learning providers so that employers can
chose the appropriate organizations to help with employee training. Another publication is 
learndirect\textsuperscript{39}, which is described in the IAG Services under the ‘Vocational Training for Adults’ 
section. These information sources have several benefits for employers. For example, by 
knowing what sort of training is being provided and where it is being provided, employers will 
know where to search for new employees. Also, if a company finds that no programs are 
providing training that will benefit it, the company can then look into having a program started 
rather than simply wondering why no one has the necessary skills to fill vacancies. But, like the 
publications for individual adults, these publications are also being under utilized. For example, 
only 37\% of small to medium-size businesses know about the services that learndirect is able to 
provide and only 4\% of small to medium-size businesses enroll their staff in its programs.\textsuperscript{40} 
Clearly, the case here with employers is the same as it has been with other groups; programs are 
not used because no one knows about them and/or does not know where to look.

\textsuperscript{39} DfES, 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Skills 
\textsuperscript{40} ‘Learndirect scheme’
5. Summary of Great Britain’s Skills Agenda

As is apparent from this report, the Government is using a variety of programs to help increase vocational skills. For young adults, the Government’s plans for National Skills Academies and Specialized Diplomas for 14 to 19 year olds are both plausible ways to help make connections between schools and employers and teach young adults skills in areas that need them the most. However, the Government’s ‘trust’ academies are not as likely to function well. The Government has also gone along way to help create strong connections between business and Further and Higher Education through programs such as foundation degrees. The Government also does have holes in its program. From young adults the gap seems to be in the lack of life skills.

For adults, the government has created several programs to help adults learn basic skills as well as vocational skills. Programs such as Skills for Life and Adult Learning Grants have so far been relatively successful. The downfall lies in the facts that many adults do not know about these programs and that some groups, such as ethnic minorities and women, are not getting the proper attention.

Finally, the Government is certainly encouraging employers to train their employees with successful programs such as Employer Training Pilots, Investors in People and Apprenticeships. But, like the adult learners, many employers do not know about these programs and are, therefore, underutilizing them.

So, can Great Britain’s skills agenda help to increase its population’s vocational skills. The answer is yes it can, in part. Many of the programs that the Government has laid out are strong, particularly the programs for adults and employers, and will certainly help those that use these programs to increase vocational skills. Those programs that have already been established
have, for the most part, been relatively successful while those that are still be implemented have a high probability of functioning well. The problem lies in the fact that there are some large holes in the skills agenda. For instance, young adults’ life skills, or lack thereof, are being almost ignored. Large population groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, are not receiving the proper attention or are just now receiving any attention at all. But perhaps the largest problem with the skills agenda is that many people do not know about the programs available to them and thus, are not participating in any program to help increase vocational skills. No program will be able to achieve its goals if no one knows it exist.

But, if these holes exist, what can be done to fix them? For young adults, two things should be done. First, the ‘Trust’ Academies should be scrapped. They do not have the right support or organization to function will. Second, young adults must be taught life skills, either through a school-wide program or special classes. As far as skills for individual adults, the most important agenda should be creating more programs specifically for ethnic minorities and women to help meet their specific needs. Finally, for employers, adults and young adults alike, all need to be better informed about the programs available to them either through a national campaign or a local information centre. If recommendations such as these are taken seriously, the Government will go along way in filling the holes in its skill agenda.
III. The United States’ Skills Agenda

1. Introduction

To discuss the skills challenge in the United States, I wanted to discover the most up-to-date information. The most accessible sources I found are government-run websites, such as the U.S. Department of Labor website and the White House’s website. These websites are not only kept up-to-date but also provide a great deal of information since most of the programs begin at the White House and are overseen by the U.S. Department of Labor. I also searched online databases, such as Business Source Premier, to find articles that discuss the Government’s training initiatives. Several articles by government agencies such as the United States General Accounting Office were accessed through this data base.

The Government websites were perhaps the most useful in finding basic information about the current workforce training and education programs. In general, the government websites provided a good basic overview as well as additional links to other programs. The articles proved to be very useful in providing additional data as well some analysis of the programs.

Like the Great Britain section, I will discuss three main areas. These areas will be Education for young adults (ages 14-25), Vocational Training for adults, and Employers Training Employees. In addition to national programs I will also be discussing state programs. Since examining all 50 states would be unfeasible, I have selected a sample of three states from various regions of the country – California, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. These states will be discussed individually and in conjunction with some national programs.
2. Educational Strategies for Young Adults

Education for young adults is a vitally important step in improving a nation’s workforce skills. Without a solid education as a child and young adult, a person will have difficulty learning more difficult skills later in life. Due to this importance, the United States government has created several initiatives to help increase the education of young adults (age 14-24).

2.1 High School Education

In the United States today, a high school diploma is becoming increasingly important and necessary in attaining employment. Clearly the United States government understands this fact. In recent years, the Government has created funding and programs to help students improve their basic skills. However, is it enough?

- Jobs in the 21st Century

In an effort to improve high school education, President George W. Bush announced the Jobs for the 21st century initiative in August 2004. As part of this initiative, President Bush has promised $500 million to help improve high school education as well as post-secondary education and job training. At the high school level, the initiative calls for improvements specifically in reading, math and science. In order to improve the reading skills of high school age students, Jobs in the 21st century has created the Striving Readers Initiative to help students who are falling behind in this skill area. This initiative received $100 million in 2005. To help improve science and math skills, Jobs in the 21st century has created two programs. The first program, the Mathematics and Science Partnership Program, is intended to assist students who are falling behind in this subject. The program called for $120 million in 2005. The second
program introduces incentives, such as loan forgiveness, to persuade math and science teachers from private schools to teach part-time in public schools. An additional $227 million was also set aside in 2005 to provide loan forgiveness for math and science teachers in low-income schools.\(^\text{41}\)

Clearly, the United States government understands that reading and math skills form the basis of a good education. Additionally, many jobs need a solid basis in these skills. For example, poor math skills would make a job such as a cashier difficult. Thus, it is vital that they have created programs to help high school students increase their skills in these areas. However, along with increasing standards and assessing outcomes, the Government does need to ensure that these funds are being allocated properly. For example, these programs need to be put in the schools that have received a failing grade on their state’s report card based on the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act\(^\text{42}\). If a school is unable to improve its student’s proficiency on its own, most likely there is a reason, such as the school does not have the capability to improve, or the school does not have the money to invest in additional programming. Thus, the lower performing schools probably are in need of such a program more than higher performing schools. Additionally, the lower performing schools are likely to have a greater number of students that can benefit from this program.

- Youth Opportunity Grants

In 2000, the Government established Youth Opportunity Grants under the Workforce Investment Act. These grants were originally meant to be a 5 year, $1 billion program that


provided services to youth in impoverished areas including providing a safe learning environment, mentors and vocational training. By 2004, the these grants had already managed to help 91,000 youth, most of whom completed their high school education and then proceeded to successfully enter the workforce or enroll in college. Despite these results, the program lost its funding in 2004\(^{43}\) in favor of a more education and training based program, although the specific program was not specified.\(^{44}\)

Although the Youth Opportunity Grants program is not a current program, it is a significant program that needs to be reexamined. Assistance to youth in lower-class areas is essential to increase the United States’ workforce skills and education. In fact, high school drop out rates for 16 to 24 year olds whose families’ income is in the lowest quartile is close to double the national average. For example, in 2004, the national high school drop out rate was 10.3\% while the drop out rate for students from the lowest income quartile was 17.7\%.\(^{45}\) As shown in the graph below this dropout rate is much higher in lower income brackets than higher income brackets.

![Graph showing dropout rate of 16 to 24 year olds by family income quartile]

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Clearly, students from lower income families are at higher risk of dropping out than students from higher income families. Because of this fact, it is essential that funding be given to support the education of lower income students. The Federal Government has already had success with such a grant program. Additionally, some states have also found success with this sort of funding, such as Wisconsin’s tax vouchers for children from low-income families to attend private schools. Thus, it makes sense for the Government, either at the state or national level, to revive the program. However, if that is not possible, then perhaps the Government can appeal to other sources by making the general public and organizations aware of how much this financial support is needed by lower income families.

- State Initiatives

States have come up with a variety of initiatives to improve academic skills levels in high schools. One such initiative can be found in California. In Spring 2001, the state of California introduced the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). The aim of the examination is to ensure that the high school graduates have reached a certain level of competency in reading, writing and math so that they are prepared after high school. Students take the test for the first time in tenth grade and then may retake sections they do not pass in eleventh and twelfth grade. In order to fully ensure that students are reaching the level to pass the test, the CAHSEE became a prerequisite for receiving a high school diploma beginning with the Class of 2006. Overall, a requirement such as the CAHSEE will certainly help to ensure

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that all high school graduates have reached a certain level of competency in English and math and thus ensuring that the skills level of young adults is higher in general.

The State of Pennsylvania has taken on a different sort of program. In addition to focusing on basic skills, Pennsylvania is also focusing on career development and workplace skills, such as interviewing and common technological applications in the work place, through the Academic Standards for Career Education and Work. Announced in late October 2006, the program hopes to help students focus on career plans and to begin thinking about what those plans will entail. Thus, this program helps to increase vocational skills by teaching practical skills such as interviewing and technology applications.

A program to teach high school students not only reading and writing, but also practical workforce skills is greatly needed in this country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only five states have standards that are aligned with college and workforce expectations. Thus, while states maybe working to increase overall skills, they need to ensure that their students also have skills that they can transfer to college or the workforce.

Funding by states has also helped to increase standards. For example, in 1991, Milwaukee, Wisconsin created a tax-voucher system that gave 1500 children from low income families $4700 each to attend a private secular school. Studies showed that students that received this funding scored 5% points higher in reading and 12% points higher in math than other students of similar backgrounds. Clearly, students from less privileged areas have the ability to improve their skills. However, they do not have the resources to do so. Thus, if a state wants to help

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young adults from lower income families improve their skills, then funding (or other resources) need to be allocated specifically for them.

- Is the Government Doing Enough?

Overall, the Government has the right idea about where it needs to lend its support, namely trying to increase reading, math and science skills as well as supporting low-income youth. However, the Government does need to continue to fund these programs, namely the grants for the youth from low-income families, as they are at the highest risk to drop-out. However, states like Wisconsin are already funding some of their own programs. Thus, funding at the national level may not have to be has great. As far as increasing reading, writing and math skills, it is good the government has set aside funds to help. But, states have taken the initiative to improve students’ skills through some unique programs such as California’s exit exams and Pennsylvania’s career education. These programs show that states are trying to improve skills in general, but more needs to be done to ensure that students will have skills levels that appropriate for paths (such as college or the workforce). As stated above, only six states have programs that align standards with college and workforce expectations.

2.2 Post-Secondary Education

Education after high school can be valuable because it provides additional skills and training in specific areas that could not have been received in high school. Thus, the Governments at both the national and state level have created several programs to help young adults gain vocational training after high school.
• Job Corps

Established in 1964, the Jobs Corps is one of the United States’ main education and training programs for young adults. The aim of the Job Corps is train its participants in one of 100 occupational areas. Participants are provided with staff support to create personal career plans. While enrolled in the program, participants are provided with housing, meals and biweekly allowances. Upon graduation from the program, the participants are highly equipped to hold a job in their chosen field. Since its establishment in 1964, the Job Corps has trained over 2 million youth and averages 62,000 participants per year. Currently there are 122 centers found in 48 states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.\(^{51}\) One such state is Wisconsin that offers programs in Culinary Arts, Electrician, Painter, Carpenter, Building Maintenance, Welder, Brick layer and Business Clerical.\(^{52}\)

Because the Job Corps program has been in place for over 40 years, is available nationwide and averages 62,000 participants a year, this programs seems to working well. Thus, the Government needs to make few changes to this program. Also, because the program is set up to help young adults gain skills in a specific area, it is certainly helping to increase workforce skills.

• Youth Employment Opportunity Program

While the Job Corps is set up to be a national program, the states such as California have created additional youth programs. In 1989, California has set up the Youth Employment Opportunity Program for young adults between the ages of 15 to 21. Through this program, California wishes to help students who are thinking of, or have, dropped out of school (whether it

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be high school, vocational training or college) achieve their vocational goals. Services that are provided include advising and referral services for job placement and/or training programs.\textsuperscript{53}

While this program is not meant to explicitly help young adults increase their vocational skills, it does have the potential to do so. One reason for this is that the program helps point youth to programs and agencies that will help them to increase their skills if they need to do so to reach their goal. The program also has the ability to do this because of its wide availability. Sixty Job service locations across the state (including San Diego, San Francisco and four locations in Los Angeles) allow for easy access to these services and thus access to the training programs with which they are connected.\textsuperscript{54}

- Working Government Involvement

As seen in the programs discussed above, some effort is being made to help youth gain some training and education who have not chosen to pursue a traditional college education. Nationally, programs like the Job Corps help young adults directly receive training in a specific area to help increase their vocational skills in that area and employability. At the state level, some additional programs do exist, such as California’s Youth Employment Program. However, some states are working heavily within the national programs. Wisconsin for instance has listed the Job Corps in its list of main training programs, but is the only program specifically for young adults.\textsuperscript{55} On the other hand, Pennsylvania lists mainly its high school system and partnerships between community colleges and employers,\textsuperscript{56} which will be discussed in a later section as

\textsuperscript{53} California Employment Development Department. \textit{Job Seeker Services}. Retrieved November 12, 2006 from http://www.edd.ca.gov/jsrep/jshow.htm

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid

\textsuperscript{55} Wisconsin Job Center

sources of training which pertain to young adults. It should be noted that national programs are run at a local level and thus states’ involvement is essential to the programs’ abilities to function. Overall, the programs discussed have the ability to help increase young adults’ vocational skills as mentioned in their description.
3. Vocational Training for Adults

Although high schools can provide people basic skills such as reading, writing and math, a higher level of skills are often needed. Increasingly, post-secondary education has become vital in securing a job. As seen in the chart below, those with a higher education level are less likely to be unemployed than those with a lower education level. For example, in the year 2000, those with only some high school had an unemployment rate of 6.5% while the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor’s degree was 1.8%

![2000 Unemployment Rate of workers with various educational levels](chart)

Source: National Institute for Literacy (2006, May). Workforce Education

Education can lead to higher skill levels as well. In fact, the level of a worker’s education is typically used to measure their skills. However, not everyone has the opportunity or desire to receive a post-secondary education. Thus, the Government needs to invest in programs to help adults without a high level of post-secondary education to improve their skills.

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57 Handel, Michael J
3.1 Available Programs

- Workforce Investment Act

The Workforce Investment Act, created in 1998, intended to create a system of programs to help adults (18 and older) and dislocated workers increase their vocational skills. Dislocated workers are considered to be an adult in one of the following categories:

- Workers who are terminated or laid-off; reasons include company closures or massive laid offs
- Self-employed workers who are now unemployed due to economic conditions such as farmers
- Homemakers no longer supported by another family member.

Specifically, the Workforce Investment Act intends increased employment, increased employee retention, increased employee earnings and increased customer satisfaction. In order to achieve these goals, the Act put into place nationwide systems such as the one-stop career centers discussed below.\(^58\)

While the Government is showing initiative with this act, some have criticized the act. One critic of the act has been the level of funding. In 2001, the Workforce Investment Act’s funding was $3.5 billion. This $3.5 billion is minuscule considering American businesses spend more than $232 billion on workforce training\(^59\). According to Helena Worthen in The Workforce Development Act and Labor Movement, “the WIA in 2001 was federally funded at a


level that makes it look like a pilot program, not like a system intended to serve the entire U.S. labor force, which totaled 132.4 million in 1996.” Obviously, some believe this is not a serious attempt by the Government to improve workers’ skills with training.

- One–Stop Services

Created under the Workforce Investment Act in 1998, One-Stop Career Centers are intended to inform adults about work opportunities as well as provide training services if needed. These career centers offer three types of services to clients. The first type of services is core services. As their most basic service, core services are intended to provided job search support and information as well as labor market information. The second level of service is intensive services that include individual counseling and career planning. Finally, the third level of services is training services. These services can help link clients to and help clients with both basic and occupational training. Typically these services are only offered to clients that have not found employment through the core and intensive services. Currently, states are in charge of monitoring these centers.60

The states themselves are taking the initiative to improve the services of the One-Stop Career Centers. For example, the career center in Erie, Pennsylvania posts a staff member at the door to direct incoming customers to the correct area and to ensure outgoing customers have received the information they were seeking. Also, Career Centers in both Erie, Pennsylvania and Kenosha, Wisconsin are using network computers systems to contain case files so that a client’s file can be accessed and updated by staff members in different areas. The Career Center in Kenosha, Wisconsin also collaborates with local colleges and the Kenosha Area Business Alliance to

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60U.S. Department of Labor, Comprehensive Adult Programs
identify labor and skills shortages. Likewise, Santa Rose, California’s career center has staff
dedicated to certain industries to identify local labor shortages.61

While these One-Stop Career Centers do not provide training, they do provide an excellent
way for workers to gather information on jobs and training quickly and easily. The Government
understands then the value of information. With easier access to information and career support,
workers will be more likely to gather this information and then participate in the programs that
they learn about. One problem however with the One-Stop Career Centers is that their success in
placing workers both in jobs and training programs is unclear. According to the United States
General Accounting Office, job placement, job seeker satisfaction and employer satisfaction are
the only means used to track the success of the centers. But, little is know about the impact of
the services themselves.62

• ALMIS

The America’s Labor Market Information System (ALMIS) is meant to provide job seekers,
employers and researchers with information on employment and training information via the
Internet, versus physically going to the One-Stop Career Centers. In additional to information on
employment and training, ALMIS also conducts research on the labor market. ALMIS is a
collaborative effort of the States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Workforce Investment Council
and the Employment and Training Administration (ETA).63

61 United States General Accounting Office (2003). WORKFORCE INVESTMENT ACT: One-Stop Centers
Implemented Strategies to Strengthen Services and Partnerships, but More Research and Information
Sharing is Needed. Retrieved 12 November 2006 from Business Source Premier
62 Ibid
http://www.doleta.gov/programs/almisfactsheet.cfm
An information source like ALMIS is excellent because it allows people to access information quickly and efficiently. With the information at their finger tips, job seekers can easily find information on job and training opportunities, allowing them to not only find employment but also giving them options to increase their skills. Similarly, employers can easily access information about what skills they can find and what skills they need to train employees to have. The combination of information for job seekers and employers allows for job seekers to appropriately match or increase their skills and allows for employers to find job-seekers with the skills they need. However, like the One-Stop Career Centers, providing training programs is not the main of ALMIS. Thus, while workers can easily find information on training opportunities if they choose, there is no guarantee that workers will actually receive training.

- Additional State Programs

In addition to national programs, states have created their own local programs to meet the specific needs of its workers. In order to give a brief overview of major programs for the three sample states, a brief description of these programs is listed below. All the programs listed here are the main training programs listed by the states’ labor departments’ websites that have not already been discussed in coordination with national programs or youth or employer programs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Type of Skills Targeted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Adult Education&lt;sup&gt;64&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Intended to help adults increase basic skills; includes programs such as Adult Literacy/High School Diploma and English as a Second Language (ESL)</td>
<td>Basic Skills – reading, literacy, math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>University Extension&lt;sup&gt;65&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Allows workers to enroll in classes at University of California at nine different campuses in a variety of professional areas including architecture, business, education, legal and the sciences; approximately 400,000 people enroll per year in 17,000 courses</td>
<td>Skills in professional areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Industry Funding&lt;sup&gt;66&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Example: PA will receive $3.75 million to increase plastic industry’s training and competitiveness; $2.5 million will be used to train about 1,200 workers over 3 years</td>
<td>Industry Specific Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>ABLE (Adult Basic and Literacy Education)&lt;sup&gt;67&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Intended for adults with low levels of basic skills in math, reading, computation or English literacy; includes programs such as Adult Secondary Diploma and English as a Second Language (ESL)</td>
<td>Basic Skills – reading, literacy, math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Individual Training Account&lt;sup&gt;68&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Vouchers for training available under Workforce Investment Act</td>
<td>Vocational Skills (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation&lt;sup&gt;69&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Provides retraining to workers who have been hurt or have other work limitations</td>
<td>Vocational Skills (not specified)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<sup>68</sup> Wisconsin Job Center

<sup>69</sup> Ibid
Clearly the states are using a variety of programs from basic adult education to retraining to increasing professional skills. This variety does mean that the states are seriously looking out their own concerns about local workforce skills. For example, Pennsylvania is worried about workforce skills in certain industries so it is allocating funding to increase workers’ training in those industries. On the other hand, California has created a system of University Extensions to increase skills in professional areas such as law. Thus, it is safe to say the states are looking at their own workforce needs and creating programs to increase workforce skills in those areas.

- The Government’s Initiatives Need Work

Thus far, the Government has shown an understanding about the need of adult education and training programs. However, it is questionable if these initiatives are actually doing anything. For instance, the One-Stop Career Centers and ALMIS main objectives are to provide information on employment and training opportunities, not to actually train workers. Thus, it is difficult to know if workers are actually receiving training as a result of these programs. Additionally, the Workforce Investment Act measures success through factors such as job placement\(^\text{70}\). None of these factors actually measure training received and thus, it is difficult to know if workers have actually increased their skills levels.

Although the national programs do need to be more training focused, the states themselves seem to have a good hold on their own needs and have created a variety of programs to meet their needs, whether these needs are basic adult education or industry related training. Also, the states programs are specifically created to promote training and education and will therefore help to increase skills in the needed areas.

\(^{70}\) U.S. Department of Labor, *Comprehensive Adult Programs*
3.2 Minorities

Although minorities are encouraged to seek the benefits from the programs listed above, they do have their own special needs that must be examined. According to Ana G. Huerta-Macías, author of Workforce Education for Latinos, the training programs that the Government is currently using need to be more inclusive of ethnic minority groups. Most of the programs are aimed at main-stream English speakers.\(^71\) This maybe because many of the training initiatives, such as the Workforce Investment Act, are open to the workforce in general, with no specific target groups. When a group is targeted with initiatives such as grants, the programs are generally based on income, rather than ethnicity or social group. Regardless of the reasons, minorities’ needs are still not being met. For example, while the English language may not be a problem for all ethnic groups and maybe more of an issue for minority immigrants, English language skills is a problem for many people, particularly Latinos who are the largest ethnic group in the United States. Specifically, approximately 93% of Latinos in the United States learn Spanish as their first language. Of those that do not also speak English at home, only 28% were enrolled in ESL classes in 1995. Huerta-Marcías also points out that minorities are more likely to drop out of school, for example, in 1998, 30% of Hispanics and 14% of blacks had dropped out of high school compared to 8% of whites.\(^72\) Poor language skills of some minorities coupled with low education levels may make training programs aimed at main stream English speakers difficult. However, a few simple improvements can be made to help ethnic minorities

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\(^72\) Ibid
greatly, such as Spanish-speaking personal available at the One-Stop Career Centers or integrating training programs with certification programs.\textsuperscript{73}

Luckily, the Government has not completely ignored minority groups. One recent example is the partnership that President George W. Bush established with the National Urban League (NUL) in June 2004. The goal of the partnership is to create programs to help minorities start their own businesses. In an effort to do this, NUL is providing training and educational services to minorities, including training in finance and contract negotiation as well as mentoring. These services can be found at some One-Stop Career Centers and are supported by funding from the U.S. Small Business Association (SBA), the Department of Commerce’s Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) as well as other Federal organizations.\textsuperscript{74} As can be seen by President Bush’s initiative, the Government is making a sincere effort to help minority groups. As long as initiatives like the one discussed here are coupled with more basic education (such as English and basic math), minority groups will be able to receive a good amount of training to help increase their skills.

3.3 Women

As the United States has grown through the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, women have made up an increasingly large portion of the labor force. For example, in 2005, of the 117 million women (ages 16 and over) in the United States, 69 million were in the labor force. These 69 million women made up 46\% percent of the total labor force.\textsuperscript{75} Women make up almost one half of the

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid

workforce and while they can benefit from the all encompassing programs, they have their own set of needs, particularly if they have decided to leave and then re-entering the work force. For instance, many women feel that they lack the confidence or skills necessary to re-enter the work force, do not know the opportunities available to them in terms of employment, or are unsure about where to find information on training and employment opportunities. However, only one federal agency has been specifically set up to look after wage-earning women’s needs – the Women’s Bureau.

The Women’s Bureau, set up under the Department of Labor was established by Congress in 1920. The goal of the Bureau, as stated above, is to help wage-earning women with their needs in the workforce. Since its establishment, the Bureau itself has repeated help women through congressional acts and by identifying their need for more skills. For example, the Bureau helps ensure that women would be covered under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The Bureau has also been instrumental in the passage of acts such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. Currently the Bureau is focusing on promoting careers for women in science, engineering and technology. Additionally, the Bureau is helping women learn online. One specific online initiative is to help Generation X women learn about financial security and retirement savings.

While the Government has done a great service to women workers by setting up the Women’s Bureau so that women would be treated equally in the work place, this Bureau does specifically address women’s needs while reentering the workforce. Additionally, in my research I did not come across any other agency or program that is meant specifically to help women with

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76 Women and Work Commission (2006)
additional training or re-entering the workforce. In fact, the Department of Labor website directs women seeking training to a list of the general Adult training programs. Thus, while this agency is making an effort to help train women, more effort needs to be made on the part of the Government.
4. Employer Training Employees

In the United States, some employers are already making an effort to increase their employee’s skills and training. A 2000-01 study found that out of adults ages 25-64 that were participating in a specific job-related training program, only 46% of these adults had an employer provide this educational training. But despite this involvement level, over half of employers are still not doing anything to increase their employees’ training. The Government could significantly help employers train their employees with accessible programs and funding. However, the question is whether or not the government is providing this support.

4.1 Available Programs

- Apprenticeships

The apprenticeship program, originally initiated by the United States government, provides a mixture of classroom instruction and on-the-job training to increase participants’ skills in a specific job or industry. For example, in order to participate, an applicant must be at least 16 years old and show an ability to understand the information and the ability to master the skills of the occupation. Currently this program functions as a partnership of employers and labors groups or employers and employer associations. However, the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training (BAT) oversees the program and registrars employer participants. Currently, programs exist in 27 states (including California, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin), the District of Colombia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.79

78 Ibid
The apprenticeship program has some potential as far as it can increase workforce skills. The program definitely allows workers to learn new skills that can be applied directly to an occupation. However, the program only has the capacity to help so many people at a time and only applies to specific industries. Additionally, the program is only available in about half of the United States. Thus while it works in the areas where it is established, it can never be used as a primary means to help employers train employees.

- Community-based Training Grants

In 2005, President George W. Bush set aside $125 million to establish Community-based training grants. The goal of these grants is two-fold. The first goal is to increase the ability of community colleges to train their students in high demand industries through investments in things such as additional faculty, new equipment and arranging on-the-job experiences. Second, these grants aim to establish relations between community colleges and local businesses. By creating these relationships, community colleges will be better able to train students that meet the needs of local employers. Seventy grants have already been awarded the community colleges in 40 different states. Also, an additional $150 million has been promised to this program for 2007.\(^{80}\)

The Community-based training grants have advantages that will definitely help increase workforce skills. In fact, 37% of small businesses that are working to improve local workforce skills already look to community colleges.\(^{81}\) While this may not seem like a high percentage,

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community colleges are actually the institutions that employers partner with the most. Other institutions include, among others, vocational schools, public schools, private colleges and business associations. Thus, the Government needs to continue to support these grants since businesses are already interested in and creating partnerships between themselves and community colleges.

- State Programs

Employer training is an area in which the states work mainly inside the national programs. For example, California, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin all participate in the apprenticeship program. Pennsylvania is also taking the lead from the community-based training grants by dedicating $1.6 million in 2001 to create partnerships between eleven community colleges and local employers.\(^\text{82}\)

In addition to national programs, a few state programs do exist. Pennsylvania has created several grants to assist employers with training including the Customized Job Training Program (CJT). To employers train existing and new employees, this grant provides up to 75% of training costs such as instructional costs and costs of materials in industries such as agriculture, manufacturing and Research and Development. Another grant is the Workforce Leadership Grant that helps technology based industries that require highly skilled workers.\(^\text{83}\) Wisconsin has also created a Customized Training option for employers through it Technical College System which can include on-site training, training through computers, long term training or focused

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seminars.\textsuperscript{84} Alternatively, California has created the Employment Training Panel to as a joint business-labor agency to help promote training. During its programs, businesses and labor decide training together, Employers may choose who to train and to create their own plans and must match at least one dollar for every dollar spent by the state.\textsuperscript{85} Obviously, both these programs provide a high level of training for employees whose new skills can be transferred immediately to their work.

- More Government Support Needed

The programs that the Government currently have in place are effective to an extent. The apprenticeship certainly achieves the goal on increasing vocational skills for its participants. However, the program both in its set-up and availability will only be able to help a small number of people. The Community-based grants give community colleges resources to help increase vocational skills and helps attracts employers to create partnerships with these schools. But, the grants only provided a certain level of funding that, if stopped, would most likely halt many of the programs set up with the funding. Thus, while the programs that the Government has set up do work, they can only work on a limited basis.

It should also be noted that while researching this topic, little information could be found on programs to help support employers both at the national and state level. This is a vital area in which the Government needs to invest. Training employees can involve large amounts of time and money that some employers do not have. Thus, more Government incentives to train

employees would perhaps help employers without the necessary resources to train their employees.
6. Summary of the United States Skills Agenda

Clearly, the United States is using a variety of programs at both the national and state level to improve skills in the United States. For example, for young adults, the government is using a mixture of programs to improve both high school education and post-secondary education, such as the jobs in the 21st century initiative and the Jobs Corps. Both of these programs can provide a solid base for increasing young adults’ basic and vocational skills by providing both funding and alternatives to traditional education. The states have certainly complemented these programs with their own initiatives such as additional funding (Wisconsin), High School Exit Examinations (California) and Career Development (Pennsylvania). While all of these state programs focus on different areas, all are helping to ensure students have a better level of skills when they graduate High School.

The government has also made a sincere effort to help adults improve their skills as well with programs such as One Stop Career Centers and ALMIS. However, the Government needs to be more specific with its plans, such as the Workforce Investment Act. Also, none of these acts are specifically aimed at increasing skill levels. Thus, while an effort has been made, it is not enough to significantly increase skills. At the state level, all three of the sample states are using specific training program in response to their specific needs. Thus, the state programs are more likely to increase workforce skills. Finally, while programs do exist, the government may want to consider more programs to support both minorities and women.

As for helping employers, the government has not made a large effort. Very few programs exist at either the national or state level to help employers train their employees. This is one area in which the government needs to focus on more highly.
Overall, I would make two suggestions for the United States. The first is to ensure that their workforce development programs more heavily focus on training. The focus of the main programs seems to be more on employment rather than improving workforce skills. Second, I would recommend that more support be given to employers from employee training. This is an area in which little support is being given from the Government. However, it is a vital area as employers can have a say in the training their employees receive and employees will have the opportunity to increase their skills.
IV. The United States vs. Great Britain

In order to answer the question, how can Great Britain’s and the United States’ governments effectively use education and training to increase its workforce vocational skills?, it would be helpful to compare the strengths and weaknesses of each country’s skills agendas. To do this, I will compare the three categories into which I divide the programs – educational strategies for young adults, vocational training for adults and employers training employees. I will then discuss what each country can learn from the other’s experience.

Within the first category, Educational Strategies for Young Adults, Great Britain and the United States present very different strategies for improving the skills of young adults. One of the greatest differences lies with the secondary schools. Great Britain is currently in the process of creating Trust Academies, which are schools that will be sponsored by private entities, and National Skills Academies, which will promote skills of a specific sector. On the other hand, the United States is focused on the Jobs in the 21st Century initiative to create programs within schools that will improve reading, math and science skills. It seems, then, that Great Britain is trying to better its system by starting with new schools, while the United States is more focused on creating programs within the current schools. This is not to say the Great Britain is not trying to improve its current schools, rather, it is trying an additional strategy. However, from Great Britain’s current experience, the United States would be well advised to not try to create a similar strategy as many of the new schools created by Great Britain in the last few years are failing. On the other hand, Great Britain may want to consider a program similar to the United States that creates programs in existing schools.

In regards to post secondary education, both countries have created programs to train youths in a specific sector to help them gain employment. In Great Britain, the government has
created foundation degrees, which are two year, work focused degrees in a certain occupational area. Likewise, the United States created the Job Corps to train and support youths in specific occupations. While Great Britain’s foundation degrees are still in the initiation process, the experience of the United States with the Job Corps, which has been a success, shows that people are interested in an alternative to the traditional University route and do desire to receive training for specific occupations. Thus, both countries seem to be making an effort to train youths and should be successful.

In the next strategic area, Vocational Training for Adults, Great Britain and the United States have taken different paths. Great Britain has created specific programs such as Skills for Life that allow adults to improve their basic language, reading and math skills. Additionally, Great Britain has created Adult Learning Grants to help adults with low incomes to pay for training. Alternatively, the United States is currently relying on the Workforce Investment Act, and resulting programs such as the One Stop Career Centers, which focus more on employment that actual vocational training. However, the States do have training specific programs that can help increase vocational training in areas in which the Workforce Investment Act does not. Additional, grants like the Adult Learning grants in Great Britain could significantly help adults with lower income in the United States increase both basic and vocational skills.

Much like their general adult programs, the United States and Great Britain have taken different approaches towards minorities and women in the workforce. Great Britain, until now, has not paid much attention to either group, while the United States has made some effort. In fact, other than ESL, Great Britain has little in place for minorities while the United States has some initiatives such as promoting small business run by minorities. However, the difference maybe that a larger portion of the United States’ population is made up of minorities groups. In
fact, the minority population of Great Britain makes up only 8% of the total population. On the other hand, Hispanics, only one of several minority groups in the United States, already make up 13% of the total United States population. Thus, it may be more important for the United States to focus on minority groups than Great Britain.

As with minorities, Great Britain is now just starting to promote women’s skills in the workplace through publications from the Women and Work Commission. In the United States, though, women in the workplace have been backed for quite sometime by the Women’s Bureau. However, beyond the Women’s Bureau, women in the United States are still not given much individual attention. Specifically, women are not being helped if they decide to leave and then re-enter the workforce. But, if anything else, women in the workforce are at least being represented and both countries’ governments are listening which could lead to more training programs specifically for women.

Within the category of Vocational Training for Adults, both countries have a very similar program – an information network with information on training and employment opportunities. In Great Britain the system is called the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services while in the United States the system is called the America’s Labor market Information System (ALMIS). The advice here for both countries is the same. While these information systems are an easy way for members of the workforce to access important information, it is vital that people know about this source. If no one knows about them, these systems are not going to help anyone.

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The final category is Employers Training Employees. It is within this category that the United States is considerably lacking. Great Britain has several programs to help employers train their employees such as apprenticeships. Another program is the Employer Training Pilots that offer free training to employers and even compensates employers for the employees’ time during training. Also, Great Britain has created the Investors in People recognition that identifies companies that continually improve their employees’ skills and performance. The United States however, has very few programs, such as apprenticeships and Community-based training grants to help employers partner with local community colleges. Additionally, the national programs are supplemented with only a few programs at the state level. Thus, the United States could use programs similar to the ones in Great Britain. With their programs, Great Britain has identified reasons that employers do not train employees. One large reason, as we see with the compensation of the Employer Training Pilots, is that most businesses tend to be small to middle size and cannot afford (in terms of time or money) their employees training. Another concern is that competitors will take a company’s employees if they train them. A program such as their Investors in People can creates incentives for employers to train employees despite this concern through a national recognition of a company concerned with employees training and skill level. The United States does not seem to have any programs that alleviate these problems and would benefit from programs similar to ones in Great Britain.

Clearly, while similarities exist between the two countries’ skills agendas, the United States and Great Britain have taken somewhat different approaches to the skills challenge. Despite the differences in strategies, both could learn from the other’s successes. Thus, I have created a list of five recommendations for how the United States and Great Britain can improve their workforces’ skills:
1. **Complement high school education rather creating new schools** – Great Britain has had no success with its new trusts schools. Thus, starting new schools is probably not the most efficient means of increasing students’ basic skills in secondary school. More programs such as the United States’ Jobs in the 21st Century should be used to complement current education systems and help those students with the lowest skills.

2. **Alternative post-secondary education options** – The United States has had great success with its Job Corps while Great Britain has had great support for its foundation degrees. Thus, creating alternatives to post-secondary education are a way to ensure all young adults receive some sort of education or training after high school.

3. **Training Based Programs for Adults** – Great Britain has been able to improve basic adult skills with training based programs such as Skills for Life. The United States initiatives do not necessarily focus on training and therefore have not basis for knowing they will increase skill levels.

4. **Specific programs for minorities and women** – Neither country currently has many training programs specific to either group. This should not be acceptable considering women make up almost half the workforce. Specifically, programs should be created to help women reenter the work force. Minorities, particularly in the United States, also should be a focus with more access to ESL programs to help minority immigrants and training programs with qualifications to help those that do not complete high school, which is more common among minorities.

5. **Incentives and Support for Employers** – This is an area that the United States has done little with, while many companies in Great Britain have proved training for their employees through government training initiatives. Many small to medium size
companies do not have the money to provide training, and thus government support
would allow these companies to provide training. Additional, programs such as Great Britain’s Investors in People, gives companies an incentive to train employees in order to receive a respected national recognition.

Overall if both Great Britain and the United States follow these recommendations, they should be able to increase their workforce’s skills.
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