

The social, the cultural and the economic case for lifelong learning

NIACE's response to the Learning and Skills Council Draft Corporate Plan



May 2001

NIACE
THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION
FOR ADULT LEARNING

Introduction

1. NIACE welcomes the decision of the Learning and Skills Council to undertake a public consultation around its Draft Corporate Plan¹, issued in March. Our initial reaction however was one of disappointment. NIACE has, until now, been impressed by the generous and inclusive interpretation of the LSC's brief given in the public statements of the Council's leadership and staff in recent months and been reassured by the Secretary of State's "Strategic Priorities" letter (also referred to as "the remit letter")². The consultative document, despite some strengths, fails to capture the breadth of focus and the balance between the labour market and social agendas needed for the Council to have the maximum impact. Our core concern relates to the absence of an adult participation target.

The Council proposes five targets – but only one of these relates directly to adults. While its focus on the attainment of basic skills and Level 3 qualifications is welcome, NIACE believes that the target is too narrow to measure the effectiveness of the Council's work in meeting the learning aspirations of the full range of potential adult learners.

We regret particularly the proposal to drop the existing participation target of "a 7% reduction in the proportion of adults classed as non-learners" and would urge the LSC to maintain an Adult Participation Target.

We use the word 'maintain' consciously. While formally separate, in practice the LSC's targets will supersede the National Targets for Education and Training that run to 2002. Those targets, first proposed in 1989 by the CBI and endorsed by the TUC, were adopted by government in the early 1990s.

After almost ten years of representations, and following the reports of the Kennedy and Fryer committees and the publication of the 'Learning Age' green paper, the value of an adult participation target was recognised and the current one was adopted in 1998. If the LSC does not adopt a similar adult participation target, the public perception of that decision will be that the target has been actively dropped and that widening participation is of a lower priority to the LSC than is currently the case. We do not believe that it is the Council's intention to convey that message.

2. The value of an adult participation target is, we believe, illustrated by key findings of NIACE's own large-scale, weighted, annual sample participation surveys. Trend findings for key groups 1996-2001 are attached* as Appendix 1 to this response. We believe that they show positive evidence of the overall impact of government policies and of a full-employment economy. At the same time they show how learning is differentially available to different social groups, age groups and in different parts of the country. NIACE believes that there is a clear policy case for the Council adopting a target for adult participation to inform its widening participation work.
3. One of the criteria considered by the LSC in adopting its targets was that progress 'should be readily measurable, not only nationally but by local Council area, by skill and employer sector, by mode of delivery and by groups of learners'. From October 2001, the Labour Force Survey will collect data consistent with the National Adult Learning Survey, enabling this criterion to be met.

* This material is included in NIACE's formal response to the LSC but not with copies distributed more widely. It is available on the NIACE website from 11th May 2001.

4. The draft strategy has much to say about the extension of learning among excluded and disadvantaged communities but it is linked almost exclusively to the economic dimensions of lifelong learning. NIACE believes that disadvantaged learners should not be limited to a curriculum which emphasises their potential contribution to the labour market, important though that is. That approach risks under-valuing the social and cultural benefits which learning can bring to people's lives. We believe that, without amendment, this Draft Plan would have the effect of diminishing the role that wider participation in learning plays in promoting social inclusion among adults.

NIACE warmly welcomed the balance struck in the Secretary of State's remit letter between the economic, social and cultural dimensions of lifelong learning. It gave a proper high but not exclusive priority to the economic dimension. NIACE believes that the LSC needs a similar balance of priorities to achieve its mission.

Section 1 of the Plan: context and remit

5. While we recognise that it is impossible to describe the context of the LSC's work adequately in a mere eight paragraphs, it would be helpful if, as well as mentioning economic and technological change, any preamble could acknowledge the impact which improved levels of learning and skills can have upon communities and localities as well as upon individuals. The paper would be strengthened if the LSC highlighted the important role it has to play in both urban and rural neighbourhood renewal and regeneration, where economic and social agendas go hand in hand.

"... learning contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity. In communities affected by rapid economic change and industrial restructuring, learning builds local capacity to respond to this change."

"The Learning Age" (Cm 3790) (1997) paragraph 12 of Foreword.

Section 2 of the Plan: mission and long-term vision

6. NIACE endorses the mission and vision proposed and is pleased that the Council appreciates that this will require a massive cultural change. We would, however, suggest that the explicit reference to "the entire working-age population" in this section

should be changed. We do not believe that the Council would wish education and training provision to discriminate against older people's learning needs. Some will want the opportunity to remain in paid work longer. Other older people may wish to maintain or enhance their skill levels for the purposes of voluntary work, to prolong active citizenship, to delay the onset of morbidity or to open new vistas in their lives.

"... there is not such a thing as a national retirement age. There is a state pension age and that will not change. What we will need to do is to look at the issue of discrimination and our purpose will be to try and ensure choice and flexibility for the individual."

Margaret Hodge MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Employment and Equal Opportunities in evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Employment, 14 February 2001.

Section 3 of the Plan: outcome targets

7. NIACE appreciates why the LSC wishes to adopt only a small number of targets – but we are not convinced that those chosen provide a sufficient framework for widening participation and for the support of the social and cultural dimensions of lifelong learning among excluded groups of adult learners. While three of the five targets (numbers 1, 2 and 4) focus on younger people, only one is explicitly for adults (target number 3). This concentrates upon achievement at Level Three

and in literacy and numeracy. Necessary though this is, we do not believe it to be sufficient to capture the richness and diversity of learning opportunities that the Council will need to support in order to fulfil the Secretary of State's guidance to the LSC.

"I look to the Council to increase the demand for learning by adults, and to increase the supply of flexible, high-quality opportunities to meet their needs. This is central to our goal of a learning society - a society in which everyone can share in the benefits of learning, enabling people to discover new talents, stretching their creativity and widening their opportunities. It is important that, at the start of the 21st century, all adults continue to develop their competence for the labour market and reinforce their ability to be active family members and citizens."

Paragraph 46 of correspondence from Rt. Hon. David Blunkett MP to Bryan Sanderson CBE. (November 2000).

8. NIACE is particularly concerned that the learning participation target endorsed by the National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets "a 7% reduction in non-learners"³ should not be, effectively, dropped. Indeed, we note that in paragraph 38 of the remit letter, David Blunkett states, "The Council must include at its heart, strategies and plans to achieve the post-16 National Learning Targets". Without measuring overall adult participation it will be difficult to assess how the existing target might best be achieved and how sub-groups of adult learners could be prioritised in the future. Indeed, the policy gains of recent years could simply slip away.
9. NIACE understands that mapping adult participation as authoritatively as the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) has presented problems at local level until now but we believe that the changes to the Labour Force Survey from October 2001 overcome this concern. In addition, analysis undertaken for the Skills Policy Action Team suggests that data can be collected practically and economically at ward level in the most disadvantaged areas. NIACE's own annual weighted sample surveys produce data that have a stable relationship with NALS results, and are easily replicable locally. Taken together with Labour Force Survey data, we

believe that an adequate tool could be developed for local Councils' use.

10. NIACE welcomes the Learning and Skills Council's acceptance of lead accountability for achieving the targets. We were interested to note, however, that the Draft suggests that the active engagement and co-operation of other partners should be confined to "other publicly-funded agencies". Given that the whole notion of national targets came from a 1989 initiative of the Confederation of British Industry with the support of the Trades Union Congress, this seems an unnecessary qualification.
11. In the case of the fifth proposed target, focusing on quality and satisfaction, NIACE welcomes the Council's intention to include learner satisfaction alongside the inspection grades awarded by OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate. We would be concerned however, if this were limited to sample surveys of current or recent learners and employers. A more active engagement with learners than as questionnaire respondents should be sought and equally, reasons for non-participation must be considered at every level if the Council is to discharge properly its radical statutory responsibility to encourage participation in learning.

"We want the Learning and Skills Council to cater for the learning needs of all individuals, and we need to find ways to show the benefits of learning for the learner as well as for the wider economy and community. ...We must never forget that many people have lost the learning habit, or may never have had it. The most learner-friendly provision, such as recreational learning that is fulfilling in itself, can offer opportunities for individuals to re-connect with learning in time to move on to courses that they may never have dreamt of taking."

Michael Wills MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DfEE, discussing Clause 4 of the Learning and Skills Bill in Standing Committee (Hansard, 2 May 2000).

Section 4 of the Plan: strategic planning process and Section 6: relations with key partners

12. NIACE applauds the attention which the Draft Plan gives to ensuring an effective balance of the local and national dimensions of its own work. Achieving satisfactory “top-down” and “bottom-up” contributions is important. These sections do not, however, capture in the same detail how external partnerships will operate. Paragraphs 8-17 of the Secretary of State’s strategic priorities letter indicate the importance attached to partnership working (with no fewer than 21 kinds mentioned) and the letter requires the Council and its members to build partnerships at national, regional and sub-regional level.
13. Most of the partners mentioned within these sections of the Draft Plan appear to be at local level. Those which are not tend to be of allied statutory services and bodies (such as the Employment Service, Connexions, the Small Business Service and Regional Development Agencies).
14. The passage of the Learning and Skills Act made clear that members of the Council and its statutory committees are appointed in a personal capacity, not as representatives of sectional or sectoral interests. For this reason, the consideration given in the Draft Plan to national and regional partnerships would benefit from strengthening and evaluation. Partnership is not something to be left solely to local LSCs. In particular we suggest that the paper would be strengthened if it acknowledged the relationships which need to be built at all levels with bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Disability Rights Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality. It would be helpful if the final plan recognised the cross-sectoral and cross-party consensus which has pushed forward lifelong learning policy over the past decade, and in particular the contribution of trade unions, faith communities and broadcasters as partners at all levels and also the broader interests of the voluntary sector (not simply as recipients of funding). Furthermore, the Plan needs to describe how the work of the LSC will develop a close dialogue with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (for

example, in the field of widening participation).

15. The contents of pages 10-15 and 20-21 are not in themselves contentious. However, we believe they would benefit from further strengthening.

Section 5: organisation

16. The Council’s establishment of a “National Employer Contracts Service” is welcome. NIACE hopes that by the time the final version of the Plan is drafted it will be possible to add details of similar arrangements that have been promised verbally for certain national voluntary sector bodies. These are organisations whose distinctive education and training provision will be better protected and expanded through such an arrangement rather than by reference to individual local LSCs.

“I expect the Council to ensure that there are appropriate funding arrangements for these colleges which recognise their unique contribution and that there is a proper focus within the Council that recognises the national as well as the more local contribution made by these colleges and similar adult education providers”.

Paragraph 31 of correspondence from Rt. Hon. David Blunkett MP to Bryan Sanderson CBE. (November 2000).

Conclusion

16. NIACE acknowledges that the document makes a serious commitment to extending learning to excluded and disadvantaged groups. We are concerned, however, that this commitment is linked almost exclusively to economic goals. NIACE does not dispute that maintaining and growing national economic prosperity is central to lifelong learning policy. We would argue though that, for the Council to achieve its remit, it is imperative that this goes hand in hand with a commitment to greater social justice. For the most disadvantaged groups, inclusion requires particular sensitivity to the broader social and cultural contributions of lifelong learning policy as well as its economic goals.

NIACE

THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION
FOR ADULT LEARNING

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NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

The NIACE website is <http://www.niace.org.uk>

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Notes

¹ “Strategic Framework to 2004: Draft Corporate Plan for Consultation” (March 2001) available from LSC, 101 Lockhurst Lane, Foleshill, Coventry CV6 5SX. Also available via www.lsc.gov.uk

² Letter from David Blunkett to Bryan Sanderson, 9th November, 2000

³ “Aiming Higher” (November 2000) National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets.

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