

Westminster Hall Adjournment Debate, 22 June 2005

The Future of Adult Education

Orientation

This briefing has been prepared by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) for Members of Parliament in advance of a Parliamentary debate on "the future of adult education" to be held in Westminster Hall on 22 June 2005. NIACE can also supply additional evidence, analysis or interpretation on an individual basis to any MP or Peer upon request. Contact details are given at the end of this briefing.

Although the case for adult learning applies across the UK, this briefing focuses on the situation in England.

Why is the future of adult education important?

What kind of a society do we want?

During the 2001-2005 parliament, the broad and inclusive vision of lifelong learning set out in Labour's first term (especially in the foreword of *The Learning Age* (Cm 3790) 1998) was narrowed into a more skills-orientated approach, driven by a concern to meet the immediate needs of the labour market. Although the government continues to make explicit reference to the broader purposes of learning in the most recent skills White Paper, the reality is a 'pick and mix' approach where its agents sometimes seem concerned only to deliver the goals set out in the most recent remit letter. This means that although formal policy, articulated most recently in *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work* (Cmd 6483, March 2005) says one thing, the message that comes though at local level can be very different. There is a mismatch, for example, between the grant letter to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (November 2004) and paragraph 231 of the later White Paper which says, rightly, that:

"There are millions of people in this country who pursue training and skills not for any job related purpose but for personal development, civic and social engagement, pleasure and interest. That includes many people who have retired and others sustaining the fabric of family and community life. While the economic and vocational purposes of skills are vital, they are in no sense the whole story. A cultured and civilised society must also sustain a wide range of opportunities to gain skills and acquire knowledge for their own intrinsic value".

The consequences of recent LSC funding decisions mean, however, that several local authority adult education services face big cuts (67% in Northamptonshire; 18% in Kent and

14% in Essex). Similarly Brooklands College, Skelmersdale College and Croydon College each face a cut of more than 10%. Even where overall funding has risen, many institutions have taken large cuts in their allocations for adult learning.

NIACE understands that economic prosperity and stability must underpin a country wishing to invest in education. We recognise too the contribution that adult learning makes to improve productivity and competitiveness and why this is important to Government. Nevertheless, we know that skills are acquired and used in contexts beyond the workplace and for purposes besides the narrowly economic (for example for the promotion of active citizenship and democracy; for culture, creativity and community and to combat disadvantage). We find much to commend in the words of former US Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, that *"We can, if we wish, reassess our standard measure of success. **We can affirm that our life's worth isn't synonymous with our net worth; that the quality of our society is different from our gross national product**"*.

The future of adult education is important because the range and volume of opportunities that are supported, however modestly, from the public purse says something about the sort of society to which we aspire as well as to the sort of economy upon which it will be built. It is worth recalling that, in 1943, when the UK economy was far less strong than it is today, the White Paper on *Educational Reconstruction* stressed the contribution that adult education was expected to make to democratic citizenship rather than to utilitarian skills for the labour market.

More recently the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning (established by the Department for Education and Skills at the University of London Institute of Education) has demonstrated, through quantitative analysis, that the benefits of adult learning of any kind accrue to society as a whole as well as to individual people and employers. It has shown that this can be demonstrated in terms of improved health, well-being, civil participation, racial tolerance and other measurables. More recently, the analysis of youth cohort data by Professor John Bynner establishes a clear generational effect whereby the children of parents without qualifications are demonstrably more likely to be poor, unemployed and in poor health when they reach adulthood. Neither the additional benefits nor the costs of not investing enough in adult learning are yet captured in headline PSA targets for Government departments and their agencies.

And a strong economic case...

The UK is an ageing society. In 2003 there were 20 million people aged 50 or above, by 2011 that figure will have risen by 1.7 million. In contrast, the number of children under 16 is falling from 11.8 million in 2002 to a projection of under 2 million in 2014. Overall, older people are less well-qualified than younger people and less likely to engage in education or training as they grow older. However, more than two in three jobs over the next decade will be filled not by new labour market entrants but by adults. There will simply not be enough young people to go around. These adults will include people delaying their full retirement from the labour market, women (especially from certain minority communities), people leaving welfare benefits and migrants. Such people have not all been well-served by post-16 education and training in the past. Government policies for adult skills and lifelong learning are not yet tuned in to this fact and are more responsive to the temporary demographic blip of younger people completing their compulsory education during the next four years. There is a danger that this will result in capacity being grown in schools (where it will not be needed beyond the short term) rather than further education (where it will be needed for decades hence).

It is of course necessary to better prepare new entrants to the labour force and reap the rewards in future decades but it is not, in the opinion of NIACE, sufficient. It is also exacerbated by a system that 'robs Peter to pay Paul'.

Why is there a problem?

The difficulties faced by adult learners and those who make provision for them are the result of structural difficulties and the problems of success on one hand and of problems of implementation and interpretation on the other. The former may have to be resolved by primary legislation, many of the latter might, we believe, have been avoided or minimised.

The structural problem: a flawed law

Clauses 2 and 3 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 place differential duties upon the Learning and Skills Council in respect of education and training for people aged 16 -18 and those aged 19 and above. For the former the Council must '*secure the provision of proper facilities*' for education, training and organised leisure time occupation, but only for 'reasonable' facilities for those aged 19 and above. In a somewhat circular argument 'proper' facilities for young people must meet the reasonable needs of individuals, whereas the facilities for adults are deemed to be reasonable '*if (taking account of the Council's resources) the facilities are of such a quantity and quality that the Council can reasonably be expected to secure their provision.*'

What this means is that Learning and Skills Council must meet the needs of 16-18 year olds first and can only spend what is left on the education and training of anyone else. The price of this distinction is that every extra young full-time student place is paid for by approximately ten fewer part-time adult students.

Problems of success

Because of the way the 2000 Learning and Skills Act was drafted, the more successful the government is at increasing 16-19 participation in education and training, the smaller the sum remaining for adult learning. Even so, there appears to be pressure on the budgets simply to keep pace with the increasing level of demand from young people this September. It is not unrealistic to suggest that there could be 200,000 fewer places in the system this September with more reductions to follow in 2006-2007 – a situation which may be worsened by the ending of the current programmes of the European Social Fund and the likelihood that a further 200,000 places may be at risk as structural funds are rebalanced to the accession countries.

NIACE is not against higher fees for those who can afford them. We believe that a high-fee, high-volume adult learning market, with generous concessions for the poor as of right, will result in more and different opportunities for adult learners than lower volumes in a low-fee economy. We believe that colleges which, in the past, have waived fees because there was little incentive to charge, should begin a migration towards the sort of levels found in many local authority adult education services. We recognise however that this cannot happen overnight without destabilising the system; that even if colleges were to collect all the fees they could under existing assumptions there would still be a shortfall of around £30 million.

Also we acknowledge that colleges in less affluent neighbourhoods are unlikely ever to be able to generate fee income at the levels that may be realised in more affluent communities.

Problems of implementation

NIACE recognises that it is the duty of Government to set priorities for public spending. Like other partners in the Skills Alliance, NIACE supports the principle of offering a learning entitlement free of fees to adults needing to improve their basic skills (literacy, numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Information and Communication Technologies) and also to adults who have yet to acquire a first Level 2 qualification. We accept that this means that others, who are able, may need to pay more. At the same time we continue to argue that public support for a wide range and volume of provision should be maintained, levelling opportunities up to those of the most generously resourced areas of the country rather than down to the least.

The translation of Government's goals into targets and plans is proving problematic. Basic skills provision that does not count towards the national tests is vulnerable to closure (for example literacy, numeracy and ESOL at the earliest 'pre-entry' levels), In addition, the insistence on "full, fat" Level 2 courses (equivalent to five GCSEs at grade C and above), rather than the accumulation of credit towards such a qualification is out of step with how adults live their lives. Many, with work and caring responsibilities are not ready to make such a large initial commitment to learning and will need recurrent and flexible "bite-sized" opportunities to learn as well as regular sustained studies across an extended period.

The Government's admirable commitment to maintain a certain volume of uncertificated learning, when combined with a fixation upon other learning that can count towards Public Service Agreement targets results in anomalies which pervert the good intentions. Two illustrations make the point:

- A certain volume of non-certificated courses in languages will be protected within the £208m safeguarded in England in 2005-2006 for adult and community learning. Some learners, who may be able to combine study for a GCSE (along with four additional GCSEs may be able to progress to a qualification. But there are likely to be far fewer opportunities in between. The pipeline of opportunities towards level 2 will simply be blocked. The development of new courses which address tomorrow's economic or social needs will diminish simply because they fall outside the current framework of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and occupy a non-priority funding category called 'other further education'). In some colleges – such as Newham Community College – this 'other' provision forms the majority of the college's offer.
- British Sign Language (BSL) also falls outside the QCA framework. Individual colleges and local authorities may take the rational decision to withdraw from offering courses for new interpreters because their local learning and skills council wishes to steer funding towards meeting PSA targets. The result is that courses are offered nowhere. Something similar happened with construction skills in the 1980s and 1990s – when colleges had no incentive to maintain expensive provision through recession. This led to skill shortages a decade later.

Problems of interpretation

NIACE does not deny that the prospects for adult learners this September are less problematic in some regions of the country than others. The relationship between DfES and LSC in England has been likened by some as a game of 'pass the parcel' with each suggesting that responsibility for difficult decisions rests with the other.

The distance that the Department places between Government and providers means that Government has, effectively, a 'single stroke' mechanism for bringing about change (especially as new Sector Skills Councils come to terms with the limitations of their reach into smaller businesses). While some LSC regions have managed funding pressures well, in others the functions of planning and funding allocation have sometimes lacked transparency, consistency and dialogue. Some staff of local LSCs continue to have an unhelpful transactional culture inherited from the Training and Enterprise Councils which they replaced, seeing providers less as partners with professional expertise and roots in local communities and simply as sub-contractors to be micro-managed. In other areas though, this is not the case.

It must be acknowledged also that some providers, sensing the direction in which the wind is blowing, are over-interpreting the steers they are given and making anticipatory cuts.

What is to be done?

The attractiveness of specific solutions to immediate difficulties will vary according to the party affiliation of Members of Parliament. NIACE suggests though that all parties should give consideration to the following four steps:

- A loud and unequivocal **re-affirmation** of the diverse public (as well as private) benefits of all purposeful adult learning. While the public purse cannot be expected to meet or even support every last need, want or curiosity of the population, government should continue to acknowledge and celebrate the value of the contribution voluntary study makes to the richness of our culture and communities. Government might in particular, assess the benefits that state support for study circles has brought to Nordic countries in terms of social cohesiveness and readiness to adapt to change.
- A **reconnection** with the role adult learning has played and can play in creating trust, respect and wellbeing as well as an active participatory democracy;
- A **relaxation** of a target culture where convenient proxies for progress mutate into rigid goals. Unlike McKinsey, NIACE looks beyond a culture of audit and endorses Albert Einstein's observation that *'not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts'*. If there must be targets, we suggest a participation target for adult engagement in learning to which the LSC has paid lip service in the past but never developed. Rather than seeking to micromanage, government and the Learning and Skills Council should rebalance public funding, so that 80% of provider budgets address national priorities, leaving 20% for responses to locally identified needs, outreach, employer engagement and curriculum innovation for which providers would be held accountable after the event.

- A **race impact assessment** of the consequences of this year's funding allocations and the move away from a system where individual learner demand played a stronger role than will be the case in the emerging system. FE colleges in particular, have proved often proved successful in helping black and other ethnic minority adults to achieve. No one would wish this to be jeopardised – and close monitoring will be needed.
- A commitment to **resource the rhetoric**. Although it is correct that the government has invested massively in adult and further education, spending on universities has increased at a faster rate. In addition, colleges are paid less than schools for the same job, staff pay rates are low and support for capital projects inadequate.

NIACE believes that the UK deserves a properly articulated and resources policy for adult education and lifelong learning, not simply a policy for adult skills. The skills agenda is important and worth pursuing but not at the expense of the other benefits of adult education.

About NIACE

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education is a registered charity (no. 1002775), founded in 1921 to represent the interests of adult learners, and of those who make provision for them, at all levels and wherever adults learn. Its membership is drawn from all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and NIACE works within and across sectors. NIACE members are primarily from England and Wales but membership also includes bodies that operate wholly or partly in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

NIACE seeks to secure an education system responsive to the diversity of adults' needs and aspirations as learners, and in particular to those who benefited least from initial education. It is our belief that a system fit for adults of all ages and in all their complexity will work better for all learners.

Contact NIACE: Renaissance House, 20 Princess Road West, Leicester LE1 6TP.

Tel: 0116 204 4200

Fax: 0116 204 4262

e-mail: enquiries@niace.org.uk

web: www.niace.org.uk

Comments about anything in this briefing should be directed to Alastair Thomson, Senior Policy Officer (alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk); telephone 0116 204 4241; mobile: 07787 534413.

15 June 2005