

Consultation on Lifelong Learning Strategy and Implementation

European Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning

Response from NIACE to the DfES.

NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) is the national organisation for adult learning in England and Wales. NIACE is a voluntary organisation with a membership drawn from right across the spectrum of adult education provision and from private, public and voluntary sector organisations.

NIACE is committed to strengthening links between organisations working for the interests of adults as learners and contributing to:

- Widening participation in education and training, employment and civic life.
- Combating exclusion and furthering equal opportunities.
- The defence and maintenance of democracy and human rights.
- Strengthening policies affecting adult learners.
- The promotion of learner's voices.

NIACE's work crosses sectoral and national boundaries. We work with local authorities, trade unions, colleges, universities, and employment-led initiatives, local communities and the voluntary sector. Internationally, project and consultancy work has been undertaken in 25 countries.

NIACE is a member of several international networks including the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), whose purpose is to link organisations engaged in adult learners across Europe.

NIACE has a particular concern for widening access to learning opportunities and increasing participation among those groups currently under-represented in education and training.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 NIACE welcomes the Commission's initiative in launching a debate on lifelong learning policies, strategy and implementation. The memorandum has provided an opportunity to discuss, consult upon and critically examine principles, practice and proposals for the development of lifelong learning with organisations concerned with adult learning in the UK and with our European partners.
- 1.2 NIACE's European Development Officer was commissioned by the European Association for the Education of Adults to undertake two separate consultative exercises on the Memorandum and produce two reports. The first involved inviting, collecting and recording the views of (mainly) Non-Governmental Organisations in the UK. The report of this exercise is enclosed. It was part of a European wide consultative process, which resulted in separate reports from Adult Learning NGOs and networks from sixteen countries being brought together, and a composite report being produced for the EAEA to present to the Commission. This final report is also attached.

- 1.3 NIACE is in broad agreement with the views expressed in these documents. In particular we would like to express the hope that the response from UK NGOs working in the field of Adult Learning is considered by the DfES and the European Commission in the development of lifelong learning strategy.
- 1.4 Rather than repeat many points made in the attached reports by answering all the questions posed, NIACE would like to draw attention to the following additional issues.

2. New Basic Skills for All.

- 2.1 The means by which an individual right to lifelong learning for all can be established requires detailed planning, the development of universal structures of opportunity and concrete proposals which take account of the current barriers to participation, including lack of time, provision, resources and motivation. A variety of studies (including that commissioned by NIACE each year) provide evidence of participation rates and examine who learns, where and why as well as drawing attention to the characteristics of non-participants. The findings of these studies need to be drawn together and used as part of the planning process to extend opportunities.
- 2.2 Access for adults to learning opportunities to acquire and update 'new' basic skills (as defined in the Memorandum), 'old' basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy), or more broadly defined basic skills (which include citizenship) is currently not guaranteed. Consideration should be given to providing a right to paid learning leave and developing rotation systems which enable and encourage workers to return to learning. Those outside the labour market, including groups who may become economically active by gaining employment in the future and those who will not, such as retired people, should have an equal right to access to learning.

3. More Investment in Human Resources

3.1 European Programmes

The opportunities to use a variety of European resources (including the Structural Funds, Education and Training Programmes etc) for lifelong learning should be made more transparent at National level. Currently National Agencies, regional bodies and Government Departments promote the different programmes and initiatives separately. There is little synergy and few attempts to provide potential beneficiaries or organisations representing their interests, such as NGOs, with a complete picture or route map to enable them to understand and access the range of opportunities.

More joined up approaches should be introduced and comprehensive promotion/information campaigns mounted which cover the full range of funding schemes to support lifelong learning.

3.2 Resources for NGOs

NGOs, who are seeking to meet the learning needs of hard to reach groups, believe that they would benefit from a more sustainable resource base. Many are engaged in short-term projects and find that successful approaches cannot be embedded because of time limited funding regimes. Both long and short

term funding sources should be open to NGOs, with resources being ring fenced for their use.

- 3.3 Research on the social and economic benefits of learning**, which illustrates the value and outcomes of investment need to be undertaken and the results disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders.

4. Innovation in teaching and learning

- 4.1 We often fail to make use of successful examples of new approaches to teaching and learning, with different groups of learners, using different methodologies. A national system of identifying, evaluating, assessing and dissemination is required, with dedicated staff. This is a role that NIACE could develop for the adult learning sector, in partnership with other organisations, given the necessary resources. A European Institute of Lifelong Learning could provide such a service across a wider stage.

5. Valuing Learning

- 5.1 Developing systems to value and appreciate learning wherever it occurs should enable greater levels of mobility and progression across the boundaries of countries, education and training structures and employment sectors. Existing European instruments and qualifications cover few areas and are little known or recognised. It is clear that this is a field where further work is necessary since it is a matter of International as well as European and national relevance. For example, the increase in migration from countries outside the EU has resulted in trained and competent migrants being unable to use their skills in new countries, because their qualifications are not recognised. New efforts should be made to establish systems, which recognise overseas qualifications and identify where additional learning is required to allow migrants to use their vocational and professional skills in European countries.
- 5.2 An analysis of existing APEL type systems should be undertaken to determine if different approaches could be moulded into a European structure.
- 5.3 The views and experiences of providers of non-formal learning opportunities, such as NGOs and the Social Partners should be valued and their contribution recognised by involving them in working groups to help plan the development of new approaches, APEL systems and the common format of the European CV.

6. Bringing Learning Closer to Home

6.1 Multipurpose local learning centres.

A variety of different local learning centres already exist, serving different client groups, using different bases (schools, libraries, workplaces, community centres etc), under different management, offering different learning opportunities. National and European research into the kinds of centres and their success in serving hard to reach groups and in supporting learning

achievements, is required to provide useful information for the planning of future developments.

- 6.2 Practitioners have identified a **shortage of appropriate ICT learning materials** and packages for use in learning centres and for distance learning. Existing materials should be evaluated and new materials developed.
- 6.3 Teachers and learning support staff in local learning centres require a range of skills and **staff development** opportunities to enable them to assist newly returning learners to progress beyond acquiring basic competencies to more advanced learning activities.

7. Additional Points and the Role of the European Community, Member States and Other Organisations.

- 7.1 NIACE believes that all the issues listed in the questionnaire should have been given more attention. We also believe that issues around inter-cultural education might have been beneficially explored, so that the role learning can and might play in combating racism and xenophobia could have been considered alongside the added dimension of European citizenship.
- 7.2 NIACE would be very interested in considering concrete proposals from the Commission on all the actions listed in the questionnaire. We would also like to see proposals to regularly consult with European networks of NGOs working in the field of lifelong learning. Such networks are able to act as advocates for adult learners, collect and disseminate examples of good practice, take part in projects, support the development of transnational partnerships and enter into informed dialogue with the Commission and other European and national institutions. We would welcome any proposals to provide core funding for European NGO networks and associations.
- 7.3 NIACE would welcome Government moves to support paid learning leave and would be prepared to contribute material and ideas to support such an initiative.
- 7.4 We are also interested in exploring proposals for a national network of locally based learning centres and national and European APEL systems.
- 7.5 NIACE agrees with the Commission's six messages and the associated objectives. However we feel that the criticisms of the scope and emphasis of the memorandum, which are fully covered in the attached documents, are justified and hope that the action plan will contain proposals, which meet these.

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