

A young man with dark hair, wearing a dark blue work jacket over a white shirt, is focused on working on a car engine. He is using a blue-handled wrench to adjust a bolt on the engine. The scene is set in a workshop with overhead fluorescent lights. The background is dark, with some equipment visible. The overall mood is professional and industrious.

The Foundation Learning Tier is an ambitious project to support learners with few or no qualifications below level 2. What can be done to ensure it achieves its potential, asks **VIV BERKELEY**

Great expectations



In my travels as a NIACE Development Officer one of the most frequently asked questions I hear is 'What can you tell me about the FLT?' The recently published *Prospectus for Progression Pathways* (LSC, QCA 2007) will prove a useful reference point and will go a long way to satisfying the thirst for information that exists for the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT).

The FLT is a welcome initiative that aims to support the millions of people with few or no qualifications below level 2 (one GCSE A* to C – a full level 2 is equivalent to five GCSEs A* to C). It is an ambitious project with far reaching implications. It is work in hand and, as such, its central principles are being refined, however the practicalities of its implementation are becoming clearer, with the *Prospectus* offering much needed information, advice and guidance.

This article describes the genesis of the FLT, what it 'looks like', its strengths and what issues exist that need addressing if the FLT is to realise its potential.

New coherence

The FLT is the term used to describe qualifications at Entry level and level 1 within the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF). It is also the term used to describe the programme of work being undertaken by the LSC and the QCA to reform provision below level 2. The policy background to the FLT was outlined in the March 2006 White Paper, *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*. It proposed a framework of programmes encompassing Entry and level 1, supported by units and qualifications from the emerging QCF. The hope is that a new coherence will replace the confusion of existing provision below level 2.

The FLT will be trialled in 2006/07, and fully implemented by 2010/11, in line with the anticipated three-year period of transition from the National Qualification Framework (NQF) to the QCF.

The FLT is to be inclusive. Provision, previously labelled as 'Pre Entry Level', which fell outside the NQF, and other non-NQF provision at Entry and level 1, has the potential to sit within a more inclusive and flexible national qualifications framework, the QCF.

'Validated Progression Pathways' will be established as stepping-stones to positive outcomes, including a first full level 2. The Pathways will meet the needs and aspirations of the range of learners at this level. Over time, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) will focus public funds on the Pathways. The *Prospectus* acknowledges that there will be some degree of stand-alone QCF provision at Entry and level 1 which may continue to be in receipt of public funding, however 'this may not be an automatic priority'.

There are currently four Progression Pathways planned:

- to a first full Level 2;
- to independent living or supported employment;
- to a level 2 Apprenticeship Framework; and
- to a Foundation Diploma or GCSEs.

The first two of these are relevant to adults. Currently, the Pathway to an apprenticeship is only for 16-19 year olds but, at some point in the future, it might extend to 19-25 year olds, in line with the apprenticeship entitlement.

Each Progression Pathway will comprise three curriculum strands:

- vocational/subject based;
- basic and key skills; and
- personal and social development.

Learner programmes will need to include elements from all three curriculum strands, weighted according to the needs of the learner. It is intended that teachers/tutors and trainers will work with learners to put together a coherent programme, drawing on relevant aspects of the strands, according to the individual needs, interests and aspirations of the learners, and using units and qualifications drawn from the QCF.

A panel formed by the LSC will validate Progression Pathways. The role of the panel will be to monitor and sample the ongoing progress, development and implementation of Progression Pathways. It will work with providers, awarding bodies and Sector Skills Councils. It will not endorse qualifications. This will be down to the QCA as part of the accreditation process.

In 2006/07 there were 40 live post-16 FLT trial sites, of which 19 focused on provision for adults. The trial sites worked variously on seven themes:

- developing progression pathways, including using units and qualifications drawn from the proposed QCF;
- trialling QCF units and qualifications;
- developing information, advice and guidance, initial assessment and review;
- collaborative provision;
- personalised learning;
- integrated curriculum; and
- work below Entry level 1.

Work with the trial sites is ongoing in 2007/08. In advance of the 2008/09 phased implementation of the Progression Pathways, regional LSCs are likely to assess provider capacity to deliver the FLT. All delivery of Progression Pathways may be subject to open competitive tendering. The Prospectus sets out the eight requirements by which providers will be judged on their ability to deliver Progression Pathways. Providers would do well to begin to audit their capacity against these eight requirements.

Potential for good

What is the potential for good? Ministers have told us recently just how important learning below level 2 is for them. In his foreword to the paper, *Adult Learning and Skills: Investing in first steps* (DIUS, 2007), John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, says that he wants 'to counter the myth that the Government is only interested in Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications'. The paper sets out the various routes available to learners working below level 2, one of which is the FLT. It states that the FLT:

will create ladders for progression that help people get started by recognising learning at entry level that moves people on to achieve at Level 1. Because this can act as a springboard to further learning at Level 2 and beyond, we plan to invest over £850 million during the next three years.

The focus on the FLT is to be welcomed. It has great potential. The four strengths of the FLT can be described as follows.

First, as stated earlier, it is to be inclusive. Provision previously labelled 'Pre Entry Level', which has, in the past, fallen outside of the National Qualification Framework, will now be included in the Qualifications and Credit Framework. This has significant resonance for learners with profound and complex learning difficulties. Finally, some equity!

Second, the focus on progression – incremental or vertical – is to be welcomed. Too often, learners, especially learners with learning difficulties, attend a carousel of courses purporting to prepare them for work but never quite making it. If used correctly, the FLT will focus on the end result, that is,

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what are learners' hopes and aspirations and how can progression pathways support them in achieving them?

Third, any attempt to bring coherence to what currently is a complex and confusing offer below level 2, must be welcomed. Progression Pathways will allow learners to build qualifications from units in the QCF, which allows for flexibility of delivery in small steps of learning.

Fourth, there is currently an intention to offer an entitlement for 19-25 year olds, if resources allow. Not everyone follows a straight trajectory in achieving his or her educational aspirations. Some need more time than others to decide what they want to do, some learners take more time to learn than others; some learners have to navigate the barriers which impede their progress – financial, family or past educational experiences. An additional entitlement of six years can only be a positive move. Let's hope it happens.

Despite the initial enthusiasm, the progress of the FLT has faltered, with a range of questions still lying unresolved. The frequency with which I get asked 'What do you know about the FLT?' leads me to believe that outside of the trial sites providers have little knowledge of what the FLT is and what Progression Pathways may mean for them. The *Prospectus* should assuage this situation. But much remains to be done before the FLT

lifts off. There are seven issues, I think.

First, since 2003 there has been a steady and serious decline in the range and volume of LSC-funded provision below level 2. There is a concern that the introduction of Progression Pathways could exacerbate the decline, especially given the White Paper's statement that 'Over time, the LSC will concentrate public funds on programmes that align with these pathways'. Most of the cuts below level 2 were from Open College Network provision, which had, paradoxically, been developed as a user-friendly alternative to exam-bearing courses. The budget attached to the LSC's recent Statement of Priorities seems to suggest that cuts to this provision are set to continue. Additionally, not all QCF provision will attract public funding from the LSC. Outside Progression

Pathways, what state funded provision will be left below level 2? The LSC will be making decisions in 2008/09 on the scale and volume of provision outside of Progression Pathways and inside QCF that they will continue to fund.

Second, and closely linked to the first point, we cannot be blind to the funding issues. I vividly recall my early days in the sector, shortly after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act when, rather misguidedly, learners with learning difficulties were shoehorned into Independent Living Skills courses because that was where it was believed the funding lay. Will learners be shoehorned into Progression Pathways as providers see them as a means of protecting provision at Entry and level 1? Whilst this is definitely not the policy intention it may end up the outcome as providers follow funding.

Third, adult learning providers know just how difficult it is to engage and retain people who have had little success or happiness from attending education courses. There seems to be an unfortunate misconception that the millions of people without a full level 2 will respond happily to the clarion call of the FLT. Outreach work, detailed advice and guidance, constant support hold the key – but they don't come cheap, and they don't always work. Both the LSC and the QCA have stated how important a wrap-around service of

information, advice and guidance is to the success of the FLT. But actions speak louder than words and the case for premium funding for this work needs to be reviewed – otherwise the success of the project could be jeopardised.

Fourth, unless funding and performance measures are harmonised to the realities of engaging and retaining hard-to-reach learners providers will have little incentive to offer provision to learners with a high risk of failure. With this in mind, the LSC's recent agreement with the FE Information Authority to establish a 'credit success rate' within the QCF, alongside the existing qualification success rate, gives some cause for optimism. It remains to be seen how such a 'credit success rate' is applied, but if it means that providers can demonstrate success for learners who achieve credits rather than whole qualifications, this will help them to develop individually responsive programmes designed to meet the needs of hard-to-reach learners.

Fifth, the insistence that adult learners have to do elements of personal and social development (PSD) will be demeaning and off-putting to many of them. Surely there should be a rethink about *all* learners on Progression Pathways having to do all three of the curriculum elements. Within the *Prospectus* there is the proviso that the 'weighting and combination of these three areas will depend on the requirements of the Progression Pathway and the learner's aims and aspirations, prior achievement or attainment, starting point and learning capacity'. My question is, if someone does not need to do any element of PSD is this allowed for?

Sixth, how will employers engage with the FLT? There are many people without a full level 2 who are *in* employment, mostly in poorly paid, unskilled work. Will employers suddenly want to invest in their unqualified workforce and set them on the road to progression pathways? Will they want to give them time off for training, up-skill them and then pay them more? Here is a perfect example of the social policy risks inherent in the new employer demand led provision – where there's no employer demand, there will be no employer-led provision, and no-one to pick up the pieces. Unions and Union Learning Representatives will need to be visual and vocal in their support of the FLT and on how it can support employers and employees alike.

Seven, where do progression pathways fit with the LSC's Train to Gain and Skills for Jobs programmes? Or with the Department of Work and Pensions' Welfare to Work programmes? Or with Neighbourhood Renewal Funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government. There is surely a strong case for a unitary programme of publicly funded adult learning opportunities below level 2 running across departments. I, for one, eagerly await the Government's consultation on learning below level 2. It may throw up some solutions to these knotty issues.



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The FLT is not to be fully implemented until 2010. It would be safe to say that provision below level 2 has taken a hammering recently but, with the Government saying just how important these learners are to them, now might be a good time to think ahead and consider the consequences, particularly the unintended ones, of the FLT.

There is a fear that the FLT project could still buckle under the weight of expectations riding on it, and that the losers will be the very people it is intended to embrace. The size of the task cannot be under-estimated. No one said it was ever going to be easy.

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Some useful links

LSC on the FLT:

<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/whatwedo/qfr.htm>

QCA on the FLT:

<http://www.qca.org.uk/FLT>

QIA on the FLT:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/page.aspx?o=114607>

QCA on the QCF:

<http://www.qca.org.uk/Framework>

NIACE response to the draft qualifications strategy: <http://www.niace.org.uk/Organisation/advocacy/QCA/FLT.htm>

NIACE work on pre-Entry and the FLT:

<http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/keyfindings/PDF/FL-Tier.pdf>