

# A step towards personalised learning

Only through personalised and flexible learning within an inclusive over-arching Foundation Learning Tier will learners with learning difficulties make the person-centred progress that will develop their skills to be valued members of the community, writes **PETER LITTLE**

Over the past four years, there have been significant and positive developments in policy concerning education and training provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. One of the most important threads running through this process has been the development of the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT), and this short article will explore and comment on this.

When I chaired the Learning and Skills Council's national review of provision for these learners in 2004/05, considerable attention was given to the large proportion of self-declared learners (numbering over 550,000 in 2005/06) whose level of study was below level 2. Amongst the recommendations accepted by Government and the LSC in the final report, *Through inclusion to excellence* (2005), was:

*QCA and LSC are urged to accelerate work to ensure fit for purpose and appropriate units and qualifications at pre-Entry level within the Foundation Learning Tier.*

This reflected widespread awareness of the needs of those learners with more severe and profound learning difficulties, who needed to be fully included in the framework. The report was also visionary in stating that the FLT 'has the potential to offer a framework that will support greater personalised learning'.

The Government and the LSC have followed through positively on this in subsequent responses. *Learning for living and work* (October, 2006), the LSC's national strategy implementing the vision of *Through inclusion to excellence*, states that 'recognition of learner achievement through a fit-for-purpose and inclusive credit and qualifications framework' will be central, and the strategy makes specific reference to the role of the Foundation Learning Tier.

Probably the most significant development has been the publication, in June last year, of the Government's joint strategy, *Progression through Partnership*. This involved three departments, the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and what was then the Department for Education and Skills, and considered the 'role of further education and training in supporting people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to achieve fulfilling lives'. Included in this strategy is a specific commitment that 'QCF and then FLT can be made more accessible to this group of learners by developing more flexible assessment methods. This includes ensuring that existing progression routes are made more accessible so that personalisation of learning pathways is possible, through the Foundation Learning Tier when developed'. It goes on to describe how 'progression through the FLT will be possible, both laterally and towards level 2' and asserts that 'we need to ensure that people progress within this by avoiding unnecessary repetition and enabling as much flexibility as possible, so that the offer does not become too prescriptive'. This joint strategy was launched and is owned by three ministers from their respective departments, and its status is underlined in the LSC Grant Letter of November 2007.

There are, therefore, justifiably high expectations across the FE sector that the implementation of the FLT will indeed herald the personalised learning envisaged by myself and my steering group in *Through inclusion to Excellence*, and reiterated in *Progression through partnership*. I have been encouraged by the progress made by both QCA and LSC, including development work on developing a 'bottomless' Entry level, incorporating those qualifications that are currently designated 'pre-Entry'. I represent Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities (as their Vice-Chair) on the FLT

Advisory Group, and have endeavoured to influence and support those working on this agenda. A key issue has been the development of Progression Pathways as frameworks for learning, and, after considerable discussion, one of the first four Pathways is for progression to independent living or supported employment 'designed primarily for those learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities ... of all ages'. It is also recognised that some of these learners will access other Progression Pathways, which is correct, as the range of this cohort is wide and diverse.

The publication of the *Prospectus for Progression Pathways* last month is, therefore, crucial, because the core of publicly funded FLT learning will sit therein. This is a working document, 'subject to revision and expansion', which is important because I believe the description of the Progression Pathway to independent living or supported employment will require further consideration. The Pathway lays down 'minimum completion requirements', namely the achievement of at least one award-sized qualification of at least six credits at the appropriate Entry level and also the achievement of at least 13 credits in total, of which at least four must be in personal and social development learning.

## Personalised learning

My own strongly held view remains that the essential progression should be evidenced by personalised learning, and that this can include those whose personal progress, whilst small, is nevertheless significant. The *Prospectus*, however, says that 'Progression Pathways will not be appropriate or relevant for all learners and this is particularly the situation for some learners with profound and complex needs. The LSC is investigating the scope, nature and scale of provision that it might support outside of Progression



Photo: Sue Perkins

Pathways'. It may indeed be that for some learners this is the case. However, I fail to see how this squares with the statement in the *Prospectus* introduction, which declares that 'provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, however, is within the scope of the programme'. It goes on to say that 'qualifications outside of a Progression Pathway may not be an automatic priority for public funding', so I do have real concern that the prospect of an inclusive and equitable offer for all learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with the most profound and complex needs will not be realised, unless there is indeed some urgent 'revision and expansion' on this issue.

I do not doubt for one moment that there remains in place a clear policy intent that the Foundation Learning Tier will be a wide and deep framework, relevant to the needs of the

full range of these learners. I also pay tribute to those who are working hard to make this a reality. However, if some severely disabled learners are excluded from a Progression Pathway, which sets artificial and arbitrary minimum requirements, then I believe that the reality will be that neither awarding bodies developing qualifications nor learning and skills providers will have the incentive to develop this provision. We have too much experience already of the 'unintended consequences' of funding policy.

#### Potential role

Whether we are speaking about reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) – and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are twice as likely to be 'NEET' – or responding to the recently launched Valuing People Now consultation, which

highlights the potential role of the FLT for disabled adults' learning, the same message comes through. It is only through personalised and flexible learning within an inclusive over-arching Foundation Learning Tier that individuals will indeed make the person-centred progress that will develop their skills to be valued members of the community, and where possible, the workforce in its widest sense. Let us all ensure that this does happen in practice.

*Peter Little OBE was Chair of the Steering Group for the Strategic Review of the LSC's Planning and Funding of Provision for Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities across the Post-16 Learning and Skills Sector. Its report, Through inclusion to excellence, was published in 2005.*

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