

BBC Charter Review:

Promoting the interests of prospective and existing adult learners

A note from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

Purpose and context

1. This paper identifies the most significant issues for NIACE as it seeks to influence discussions about the current BBC Charter in ways that will improve, increase or extend opportunities for adults who wish to use the Corporation's services for learning.
2. The questions which NIACE believes should be central to those charged with reviewing the BBC Charter are:
 - i. Does the BBC give sufficient priority to educational (as opposed to educative or factual) programming?
 - ii. Is the BBC's balance between formal and informal education right?
 - iii. Is the focus on adult learning right in both formal and informal activities?
 - iv. How well does the BBC listen to other stakeholders in the educational field when considering its educational and educative activity?
 - v. Is BBC educational and educative activity distributed appropriately across its services?
 - vi. Does the BBC work appropriately with other public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters (and other content distributors) and programme makers on educational matters?
3. Overall, NIACE is supportive of the BBC and of the continuation of the licence fee but argues:
 - that the Corporation neither spends enough on, nor gives sufficient airtime to, adult learning and
 - does not always do the right things in the right places with the resources it does spend.

At the conclusion of this paper we call for a substantial increase in spending on educational programming, rising over the life of any new Charter and a consequential increase in the amount of airtime devoted to such programmes which include both formal and educative programmes and which reflect the changing demographic profile of the UK.

4. We believe that the BBC's educational mission should remain central under a new Charter. We believe that it should discharge the educational dimension of its remit in a range of ways that reflect the complexity and diversity of the United Kingdom's cultural, civic, social and economic society in ways that are accessible and engaging for people of all ages. In particular, we believe that broadcasting has a particular responsibility in the field of political education since the electronic media have a uniquely powerful role in framing national agendas and contributing to public understanding of the forces shaping our lives.

Does the BBC give sufficient priority to educational programming?

5. **Although NIACE acknowledges the quality and the enormous range and volume of educative programming across the BBC's broadcasting and online services we are not wholly convinced that it gives sufficient priority to the educational dimension of its mission. Our concerns centre upon the following:**

- i. The overall budget for educational programming, though significant, is a very small proportion of the BBC's budget.

(From a licence fee of £2.8 billion (2003/04) the BBC spends £142 million on services with specific formal or informal learning objectives. Of this sum, the spend on output with formal learning objectives is just £29.4 million; the informal targeted learning output is £112.6 million and 'Broad factual programming' accounts for £371.4 million).

- ii. Although it appears that the total annual airtime given to educational/educative programming across all broadcast services is not easily found in public documentation, it is reasonable to suggest that this figure will not be high and the figure broadcast in peak time even lower.

(NIACE believes that public debate on the adequacy of BBC educational and educative programming would benefit from disclosure of a figure (broken down by service) of the total airtime and the total amount of new programming per service per year over the past 5 years).

- iii. The fact that it is the BBC itself that determines what it will count as a 'learning service' may result in an over-statement of what the public or Parliament might recognise as such programming (£2,170,000 for 'Lifestyle' websites; OneMusic (helping young people get into the music industry) etc)).

The formal/informal balance overall

6. While NIACE agrees with the BBC's belief that the informative content of a wide range of factual, current affairs and drama programming can provide opportunities for learning, we note that the amount of formal educational programming has declined over the period since the last charter review and is now insufficiently visible in the overall mix. The elision of "educational" into "educative" programming over the past 10 years amounts to a sleight of hand in this respect – and it would be regrettable if this were to continue by "educative" eliding into "factual". The BBC and others have shown that TV can be used imaginatively to teach as well as to inform – this is something of which the BBC takes insufficient pride.
7. NIACE believes that educational programming is driven by its purpose. While education has often used a factual format, much recent factual programming has been entertainment-led (for example, lifestyle and makeover programmes). This is why the grouping of 'Learning and Factual' remains a concern to many in the field.
8. The table below summarises the BBC's categorisation as set out in the Corporation's submission to the Independent Panel on Charter Review (*The BBC's Learning Impact*, September 2004) and includes further information drawn from the same document.

Formal educational activities	(£29.4m in 2003/04)
Cbeebies (pre-school channel)	£7.9 million
Services for schools	£11.7 million (1,335 hours TV programming + 224 hours radio programming costing £1.38 million)
Essential skills services (Skillswise and Webwise)	£774,000 + LSC and ESF external funding
Community initiatives	Includes 12 BBC buses and 7 BBC Open Centres. No cost given
Informal, targeted services	£112.6 million in 2003/4)
Factual landmark services (inc. <i>The Big Read; Walking with Cavemen; Restoration; How to be a Gardener</i>)	£48.6 million
Enduring online factual services (on-line sites)	No total cost given but figures suggest at least £4.787 of which £2,170,000 is for 'lifestyle' websites
Social action	£11.1 million
Continuing learning services (Sport Academy; OneMusic and BBC Languages)	No cost given
CBBC learning component	£46.7 million

Informal learning from general programming	£371.4 million in 2003/04 (9,900 hours of factual programming p.a.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Television Factual: (3,700 hours on BBC 1 and 2 + 2,500 hours on BBC 3 and 4. Documentary: (3,600 hours, 1,578 on BBC 1 or 2) 	Factual: BBC1 peak time: 489 hours BBC2 peak time: 780 hours Peak time arts programming: £20m.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Radio (1,295 factual programming + 721 arts + 1,738 hours current affairs) 	

9. Whilst the BBC's formal and 'informal but targeted' learning provision is evaluated in educational terms, a similar level of evaluation of the educational benefits of the informal learning from general programming is not so visible. This makes it hard to assess whether ascribing educational impact to such programmes is defensible.
10. NIACE also considers that the BBC is premature in bundling together the cost of its on-line educational services with its on-screen educational spend when reporting on its commitment to education. This is because since the latter services are not universally available, free at the point of use to all licence-payers.

The formal/informal balance in respect of adult learning

11. From the figures given above, and even making the (generous) assumption that all programming that is not Cbeebies or Schools-related may be of interest to adults, **only one third of the BBC's spend on formal learning (£9.8m) goes on adult continuing education. NIACE believes that, for all the BBC's strengths, this does not represent a sufficient investment from the licence fee in the lifelong learning needs and wants of its adult audiences.**
- In 2002, the UK population of working or pensionable age was 47,470,000. The BBC spends less than 21p per head per year towards meeting the formal learning needs for this group.
 - Future plans for the BBC Digital Curriculum initiative appear to be designed primarily for learners who will study full-time.
12. NIACE acknowledges that the BBC's informal, targeted learning services contain many of the brightest jewels in its learning crown. Nevertheless, more than 40% of this spending is concentrated on learning opportunities and support for 7 – 12 year-olds through the learning component of CBBC programming. **NIACE believes that this proportion is too high – especially given the demographic profile and population trends within the UK.**

13. In general we believe that, rather than compositing discussion of on-air programming with other on-line and outreach services into a single discussion, it is important to consider each element separately. A failure to identify the volume of on-air programming in this way (and to differentiate between pre-school and schools' programming from general educational programming) makes it difficult to analyse trends over time.

How well does the BBC listen to other stakeholders in the educational field when considering its educational and educative activity?

14. NIACE is concerned that, since the demise of its Continuing Education Advisory Committee, the BBC has had no mechanism for maintaining an ongoing formal dialogue with other educational stakeholders. **We believe that this is a serious shortcoming and that such an advisory body should be re-established.** One-to-one conversations limited to the BBC's own needs (or with DfES about the Government's needs) are not sufficient. The dialogue needs to be on-going, multi-agency and not limited to marshalling alliances behind the BBC's own flagship projects (although this is certainly valuable). It also needs to have an open agenda so that the field can inform the BBC about emerging concerns and can advise the BBC upon the value attributed by its partners and other stakeholders to its activities (for example educational reasons behind the locations of BBC community initiatives [busses and centres] are far from transparent and, in the case of Hull appear to be determined by technological considerations as much as educational ones). While BBC-branded learning centres and busses are valuable developmental activities, they reach only a very small number of licence payers in comparison with the already large network of publicly-funded learndirect and UK Online centres. NIACE believes that a more structured dialogue in this respect would benefit both the BBC and other stakeholders.
15. Although the relationship between the BBC and the Department for Education and Skills will always be a sensitive one, with the BBC rightly concerned to ensure its independence and autonomy, NIACE believes that an annual meeting between the BBC and the Department's ministers might be of value to both parties, giving the BBC opportunity to present its educational activity in the round and giving ministers an opportunity to set out Government's assessment of national educational needs and priorities.

Is BBC educational and educative activity distributed appropriately across its services?

16. **NIACE is not convinced that the BBC's educational and educative activity is distributed appropriately across the full range of its services.** While acknowledging that the advent of multi-channel broadcasting is changing the whole broadcasting landscape, **we do not believe that formal educational programming should be squeezed**

off-line, onto minority channels and off-peak time slots. We believe that there should still be a place on the flagship BBC1 and BBC2 channels for formal continuing education programming at peak times. This does not have to be confined to high-profile factual initiatives – the two-minute ‘guerrilla programming’ approach used to promote the Second Chance initiative in 1992 and 1993; and the family literacy initiative later in the decade, showed that high-impact powerful and creative television could serve as a powerful motivator for adult engagement with learning. In addition we note with regret the loss of the ‘eavesdropper’ benefit offered successfully to thousands of adults from Open University programmes.

17. We are disappointed that so few of the new digital resources has been devoted to educational programming (less than was planned in the past). The older audience, for example, is not well-served in the daytime and would benefit from greater choice. The contrast between serving the needs of this group against children’s programming (via CBBC and Cbeebies) is striking. Some re-configuration here so as to offer a range of daytime general programming on the digital channels for adults may be desirable.
18. Overall, NIACE believes that it is right to presume that all BBC services should make a commitment to educational and educative programming and that exceptions to this should be agreed by the Governors as part of the ‘Service Licensing’ arrangements proposed in *Building Public Value*. Exactly how that responsibility should be discharged should be for the service to determine, being held accountable after the event.

Does the BBC work appropriately with other public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters (and other content distributors) and programme makers on educational matters?

19. NIACE finds it difficult to comment on the appropriateness of the BBC’s arrangements with other public service broadcasters as these are, in our opinion, insufficiently public and transparent. A crucial relationship here is with Channel 4, whose educational remit is specifically written into Section 265 3(c) of the Communications Act. The requirement is for the channel to make ‘*a significant contribution to meeting the need for the licensed public services to include programmes of an educational nature and other programmes of educational value*’. This contribution also has to be distinguished from Channel 4’s schools programming, originally transferred from ITV together with its educational liaison and backup to form 4 Learning and now positioned under Channel 4’s profit-making arm, 4 Ventures.

20. NIACE has noted with concern that the Channel 4 offer is branded for the youth market rather than for the full public service range of lifelong learning as is its statutory remit. We believe not only should Channel 4 maintain its broad array of on-screen educational programming for adults as it has done since its inception but that it should once again provide an important element of competition and stimulus to the BBC across the full range of public service programming.
21. We do not believe that the BBC should be the sole public service broadcaster. Competition firstly from ITV and then Channel 4 had a beneficial effect on the BBC's PSB output when each came on air. NIACE continues to regret the loss of educational programming from ITV under the 1990 Act. ITV had built up an important network of Community Liaison Officers which allowed the ITV companies to come together with national educational campaigns, as well as backing local and regional programming. In this way ITV's successful campaigns both challenged the BBC to improve and complemented it by reaching different audiences. This kind of relationship needs to be re-established if another public service broadcasting platform is developed.
22. Overall, NIACE believes that the future of public service broadcasting is best considered in the round and should not be limited to the Charter renewal process.
23. Recent years have seen examples of PSB at its best. The *People's War* initiative, for example, showed how the BBC can, when it chooses, engage with the experience of an ageing audience – something it must learn to repeat given the UK's demographic profile. Similarly creative approaches are needed to address issues of community cohesion; of cultural diversity and identity and, increasingly importantly, language learning. Here the BBC's recent track record has been disappointing and the maintenance of its strong reputation placed at risk.

Conclusions

24. As noted in paragraph 5.1, from a licence fee of £2.8 billion (2003/04) the BBC spends £142 million on services with specific formal or informal learning objectives. Of this sum, the spend on output with formal learning objectives is just £29.4 million; the informal targeted learning output is £112.6 million and 'Broad factual programming' accounts for £371.4 million). Paragraph 9 notes too that, only one third of the BBC's spend on formal learning (£9.8m) goes on adult continuing education. And:

- 25. NIACE believes that, as a condition of Charter renewal, the BBC should be required, over the life of a new Charter, to increase spending on services with formal learning objectives to no less than 2.5 per cent of its total licence fee budget; that it should agree a range of on-air targets and new programming targets for its mass channels and a curriculum range designed to stimulate and sustain engagement with Britain's culturally diverse past and present.**

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Footnote: About NIACE

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) works to encourage more and different adults to engage in learning of all kinds. Its functions include research, development and consultancy; advocacy to inform and influence public policy; information services and dissemination; campaigning for, and celebrating the achievements of, adult learners. Established as the British Institute of Adult Education in 1921, it is an independent non-governmental organisation, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. Its corporate and individual members come from all sectors concerned with adult learning: colleges; local authorities; universities; voluntary and community organisations; churches; broadcasters, employers and unions. For more information about this paper please contact Alastair Thomson (Senior Policy Officer) in the first instance.