

Shaping the Way Ahead

**The response of the
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
(NIACE)
to the consultation on the future of informal adult
learning launched by the
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills**

June 2008

Executive Summary

1. NIACE warmly welcomes the Government's initiative to consult on the role of informal learning in post-compulsory education and training, and in a wider public policy agenda. It provides a much-needed opportunity to articulate the work of structured adult education classes with the wide range of learning opportunities available through new technologies, and through voluntary and community organisations. NIACE welcomes too, the prospect of better harmonisation of the wealth of initiatives in different Government departments that promote learning for social cohesion and active citizenship.
2. However the consultation comes after a period of rapid restructuring of public support for adult learning, an overall drop in participation in learning adults choose for themselves, and in particular a reduction of provision in the areas of first steps learning and 'other further education'. To maximise public confidence and secure the best benefit from this positive re-framing, NIACE believes Government should seek to secure change that will leave learners in structured, and self-directed informal learning feeling better supported. NIACE further believes that can be achieved with modest injection of £50 million of new resources to secure the appropriate infrastructure as well as imaginative pooling of existing budgets.
3. NIACE also recommends the creation of an Informal Learning Innovation Fund (similar to the previous Adult and Community Learning Fund - ACLF), to stimulate participation and allow best practice to flourish. As with the ACLF, NIACE would be willing manage the innovation fund at a distance from Government. By using an NGO partner it would be easier to foster a culture of risk beneficial to any innovation strategy.
4. A new approach should have at its heart a coherent and comprehensive outreach strategy offering the highest quality of provision to those with the greatest educational need. This strategy, in particular, should be shared and developed across the many Government departments providing informal learning opportunities as part of their operations and activities and should see widening participation in learning as a priority.
5. This will require both a cross-governmental initiative with ministerial champions in a range of Departments and also a new concordat between local and central government to re-vitalise and reform the role of authorities in providing the local focus of an informal adult learning infrastructure.
6. The workforce development of paid and voluntary staff in the system must also be a priority for development.
7. This submission outlines NIACE'S own experience, offer definitions and a version of how an informal learning service can foster a culture of lifelong learning, address the challenges in the consultation paper and make a number of recommendations.

1. Introduction

About NIACE

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent non-governmental organisation and charity. Its corporate and individual members come from a range of places where adults learn: in further education colleges and local community settings; in universities, workplaces and prisons as well as in their homes through the media and information technology. The ends to which NIACE activities are directed can be summarised as being to secure more, different and better opportunities for adult learners. NIACE works to secure both formal and informal learning at all levels.
2. NIACE is a leading voice in adult learning and represents the interests of all learners, advocating increased opportunities for adult learning and for better quality provision. However as an organisation it is particularly concerned to advance the interests of those who have benefited least from education and training in UK society. The Institute carries out its work through advocacy, research, development and promotion, in partnership with all stakeholders in adult learning.
3. NIACE welcomes wholeheartedly the Government's desire to consider how it can better realise the potential of informal adult learning. It is clear that, despite increased levels of investment in post-compulsory education and training overall, a price has been paid in terms of participation rates lower than hoped for and a decline in the range of publicly-supported opportunities taught by skilled professionals, especially at the more structured and certificated end of the informal spectrum (so-called 'other further education, much of which would have been non-certificated prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and its controversial "Schedule 2" of courses qualifying for public funding). The consultation provides a welcome opportunity to re-balance.

Definition of Informal Learning

4. In its current consultation paper, the Government refers to "informal learning" yet the concept is left under-defined – and legislation distinguishes only between the further and higher education of adults. NIACE recommends that, for planning purposes, the Government adopts a definition that combines elements of what the European Union describes as 'non-formal', as well as 'informal' learning. This would include:

"Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates... provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups... through organisations or services that have been set up to complement

formal systems (such as arts, music and sports).” **Commission of the European Communities, 2000)**

And also:

“Daily activities related to work, family or leisure...not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support) and intentional.” **(Commission of the European Communities, 2001).**

NIACE expertise in informal adult learning

5. NIACE has worked with providers of informal adult learning since its foundation in 1921. Its founding members were the providers of opportunities for adults outside the then-formal system. The ‘responsible bodies’ (university extra-mural departments and the WEA among others) and local authorities were among the key providers of adult education activities that met people’s interests and developed their role as informed, engaged citizens.
6. NIACE has been closely involved in many of the key developments in informal adult learning ranging from educational broadcasting (via the joint committee with the BBC which resulted in the Hadow Report (1928) and more recently through Ofcom-supported promotion of media literacy); to the institute’s *Art for the People* initiative and involvement in the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts which resulted in the birth of the Arts Council (1947). In the field of information, advice and guidance, the NIACE-led Adult Learners’ Week pioneered and piloted the telephone helpline (1993 onwards) which became the learndirect national advice line. NIACE was an initial sponsor of the Government’s UK Online centres initiative, linking informal learning and new technologies.
7. Throughout its life, NIACE has continued to work with providers and supporters of informal learning as well as more formal further and higher education institutions. It receives top-sliced funding through the Local Government Association to support local authorities in delivering or securing adult learning opportunities. It supports a wide variety of practitioner networks involved in the provision of informal learning including networks of black and minority ethnic practitioners; those providing for older learners; for young adults and for those working with informal education in further education colleges. NIACE also established and continues to support LEAFEA the network of local authority officers involved in adult learning. Its wide membership includes organisations from all sectors that see informal adult learning, particularly for those who are disadvantaged, as their primary purpose.
8. Over a lengthy period, NIACE has advised Ministers on matters relating to the development and sustenance of community-based adult learning and the Institute has also been used for this purpose by the LSC since its inception. We have, additionally, carried out research and development

work for providers across the spectrum of informal learning ranging from the National Trust and community sector organisations to local authorities and universities.

9. NIACE was responsible for managing the Government's own central fund for informal adult learning (the Adult and Community Learning Fund) which, over a six year period, demonstrated best and most innovative practice in delivering adult learning to the most deprived and alienated communities. Once the Adult and Community Learning fund was transferred to the Learning and Skills Council, NIACE continued to support the initiative until changes in funding priorities led the LSC to discontinue it, despite continuing evidence of demand.
10. This experience enables NIACE to make a uniquely well-informed response to the Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills consultation.

2. A vision of an informal adult learning system for the 21st century

11. NIACE believes that the Government should value all learning that contributes to the transmission of cultural values and the socialisation of individuals that allow people to live together in 21st century Britain.
12. Learning of this kind may occur in the private realms of the family, workplace, cyberspace and the voluntary associations of civil society as well as through the publicly-funded post-compulsory education and training system. Such learning allows people to fulfil their individual potential and aspirations as active members of a democratic society.
13. So far as is possible, the state should encourage a culture of lifelong learning expressed through a diversity of forms, accessible to the full range of its people, and supported by skilled and trained staff. While it should not impede any positive, purposive learning, it is entirely legitimate for any Government to prioritise the level and nature of support it gives to adult learning in order to meet the economic and social needs of the country as a whole.
14. NIACE believes that the Government has yet to appreciate fully the extent to which investment in adult learning of any kind and at any level can add public value to its activities across a range of social and economic policy areas.
15. An illustration of this is the estimate from the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning that taking three to ten leisure courses raises racial tolerance by 73 per cent more than the predicted change in this attitude for similar adults or that for every 100,000 women enrolled in adult learning in the UK an estimated 116-134 cancers could be prevented because of the greater take-up of cervical smear tests¹.
16. Whether it is formal or informal, adult learning also enhances the general well-being of the population and creates individual value by enabling people to live happier, healthier and more fulfilled adult lives. Learning has a catalytic value in achieving social and economic goals as well as being a thing of value in itself (as recognised in the Government's rhetoric since its *Learning Age* green paper (1998)).
17. NIACE's vision is of a system which ensures the provision of a high volume of affordable opportunities for the widest spectrum of adults; one that offers the choice and diversity to the many, not simply to those with the deepest pockets. NIACE also favours a wide range of delivery options, including

¹ Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (2008) *The Wider Benefits of Learning*, London: The Institute of Education.

those using face-to face tuition with skilled teachers and tutors as well as those using technology to deliver learning. In this respect Government should be clear about its responsibility to support the work of paid and voluntary teachers and facilitators in furthering public goals.

18. NIACE believes that, when supported by information and advice, adults are able and willing to choose the kinds of learning that will bring progression and success at work, personal fulfilment and increased social cohesion.

Location within an overall system

“We want to ensure that we have the best possible arrangements for securing vibrant and fulfilling informal adult learning for the 21st century” **(Consultation paper, page 4)**.

19. In considering how best to use the resources Government makes available, NIACE recommends that the DIUS should take account of:
 - informal adult learning organised, autonomously, through third-sector, mutual and commercial providers;
 - informal adult learning supported and secured through publicly-funded services and organisations. These will include institutions of further and higher education in England but go beyond them to include public service broadcasting and informal learning organised as part of the responsibilities of other departments of state; and
 - the arrangements for two-way movement between less- and more-formal opportunities.
20. Public funding will never be sufficient to provide all adults with the education and training they seek – let alone to engage and motivate more adults to participate. NIACE believes the public interest is best served by a mixed economy within which employers pay more for the skills they need to boost business performance (whether acquired formally or informally) and where those who can pay for their learning are expected to do so and to meet most of the direct costs of delivery.
21. Such a system would have space for:
 - a commercial sector, responsive to market forces in innovating and balancing risk and reward;
 - third sector, mutual and self-help associations and organisations using learning to deliver their self-identified objectives;
 - publicly-supported initiatives
22. The commercial sector will respond to the potential to meet people’s changing aspirations. The third sector should be encouraged to play a

growing role in meeting people's wish to engage more actively in the life of civil society, but the public sector has the crucial underpinning roles described below. NIACE believes that the roles of the state should be to:

- ensure that a common baseline of adult education opportunities is available in all parts of England. This would include access to literacy, language and numeracy, ICT with the potential to be extended to include basic scientific literacy and a modern foreign language offer;
- meet the state's own priorities for adult education and training in support of its policies for sustainable economic prosperity and social inclusion/cohesion;
- empower and resource local government to respond to a range of local learning demands and needs by securing provision directly or through others and to be the provider of last resort;
- encourage adults to establish and maintain their own high-quality, self-organised, inclusive learning opportunities;
- secure partnership, synergy and mobility between all learning providers, formal and informal, public and private, face to face and via information and communication technologies;
- promote increased participation and innovation in and access to, formal adult learning;
- act, on behalf of learners, to secure and support paid and voluntary staff engaged in the teaching or facilitation of informal adult learning of public value.
- Encourage employers to contribute to the costs of adult learning (a responsibility under the Learning and Skills Act 2000).

Depth and breadth

23. NIACE endorses the Government's view that informal adult learning must build on the technologies used by learners now and in the future while acknowledging the continuing existence of a 'digital divide'. NIACE's vision is of a system where the wide range of voluntary, private and state funded opportunities can interact much more effectively. A wider range of options are needed for deepening knowledge, understanding and skill and the development of learning communities that transcend geographical boundaries.
24. As well as a breadth of opportunities, NIACE urges the Government to deepen the reach of informal learning too. It needs to engage the interest and participation of those who are most excluded by using exciting and interesting provision and access to a range of progression opportunities for both personal development, and for jobs and careers.
25. To achieve this NIACE advocates the adoption of a coherent and comprehensive outreach strategy offering the highest quality of provision to those with the greatest educational need. This strategy, in particular, should be shared and developed across the many Government departments providing informal learning opportunities as part of their

operations and activities and should touch the lives of all England's diverse communities.

26. The system should involve communities and learners in shaping how funding is used to support adult learning within any given area and providing feedback from those who have taken part in learning. However, NIACE would wish the bulk of funding to support high-volume, high-quality innovative and creative provision. What is required is a robust, slimline infrastructure - not new, unwieldy and overly-bureaucratic planning mechanisms. It is preferable to adjust existing local area agreements and local strategic partnerships rather than supplement them with a new layer of funding agency bureaucracy following the closure of the Learning and Skills Council. This is especially so within a system where many players' support from the public purse will be limited or shaped by the agendas of non-DIUS public funding.

Stimulating and Accessible

27. NIACE urges Government to work to encourage the use of a far wider range of public spaces for all kinds of adult learning. This should go far beyond colleges and universities (which should also be required to have or develop an 'open door' policy to maximise the use of facilities for learning activities by voluntary and community agencies in addition to their own programmes).
28. The community-facing role of schools is an area ripe for development although DIUS should not underestimate the challenges of ensuring such work meets the wider learning needs of adults (in broader roles than just parental) instead of only young people and children. It is also important to ensure that the development of provision within community-facing schools is coordinated in order to complement, rather than compete with, existing learning opportunities available locally.
29. Universities too have an important role to play. One element of this is through the tradition of liberal adult education and civic responsibility through which higher education institutions have made the research and knowledge that has been supported from the public purse available to civil society. A second role of universities (shared with agencies like the Workers' Educational Association) is to provide a public space for rigorous analysis and informed discussion of challenging issues – for example around medical ethics; community cohesion and migration or climate change.
30. Colleges of Further Education have a long and successful tradition of combining vocational and academic study with less formal learning and the current consultation should not be used to constrain the work of colleges with a strong community-facing ethos, nor to push their work back onto a narrower canvas.

31. There should be a presumption that all public cultural institutions, libraries, community associations and schools should give sympathetic consideration to the development of a programme of formal and/or informal adult learning alongside their primary or other functions. To foster this, Ministerial lifelong learning Champions in Departments of State other than DIUS – and Regional Ministers - should be charged with responsibility for driving forward improvements.
32. Private spaces such as workplaces, social clubs or faith community premises might also be encouraged to open up to a wider public. There are, for example, instances of workplace learning centres being opened to the families of employees. There are legitimate issues here about potential liabilities in the event of an accident but these can be overcome – not least through the support of union learning representatives.
33. As premises are opened up, a key public function should be the collection and dissemination of information about what is available to the whole adult population. This should not be taken for granted – whole communities might be excluded through inadequate attention being given to cultural and linguistic preferences of different groups, the accessibility of provision to people with limited mobility and/or other barriers to participation.
34. The publicised offer for any given locality should be rich with courses, classes, workshops, demonstrations and discussions of all kinds, both private and public. These need to be accessible at different levels and with different forms of engagement including guidance on how to be supported to learn through technology. In addition clarity will be needed about what is funded from the public purse and where accountability for quality lies.
35. Alongside this promotional function, an ideal system would support adults in navigating a more complex environment and in making choices that are right for them. This would encompass both first-steps into learning and progression, whether that is towards more formal qualification-based provision or to more advanced but still unaccredited study. NIACE believes that the proposed adult advancement and careers service has considerable potential to be more than an agency for vocational skills and benefits advice. Technology has an important role to play here in allowing learners to chart the learning journey and celebrate their successes in ways that can inspire others, but face-to-face contact should supplement telephone and internet-based services.

Quality in Quantity

36. The final element of NIACE's vision is that of a system which values and promotes the best teaching and learning whether in traditional classroom formats, through the facilitation of self-managed learning or via technological media. Enhancing and extending the quality of adult learning is important particularly for those whose first educational experiences have been poor so it is vital that as much as possible is done to spread and

promote effective pedagogical practice through the informal as well as the formal educational system.

37. An effective informal learning sector will be one where the whole range of providers - public, private and voluntary - are motivated and able to access support in making their opportunities better and more valuable to the learners they engage. The system must be open to innovation and improvement in all aspects of its curriculum and service. While the quality criteria required should differ from those of the more formal sector, they should be no less of a priority. 'Informal' must not be allowed to become synonymous with 'lower quality'.
38. A skilled workforce is central to a high-quality system. This includes paid workers and also volunteers acting as facilitators, animateurs and mentors as well as teachers and trainers. This area is under-developed in the consultation paper but the topic will require considerable attention as any new system is built.

What is known about adult demand for learning?

39. The following two figures (drawn from NIACE's most recent participation survey (*Counting the Cost* (2008))) show the following trends that should inform planning:
 - People of all ages recognise the need for better IT skills.
 - Work associated learning plays an important role in earlier stages of adult life.
 - Learning for a wide range of civic and social needs is of greater importance to older adults, as people seek to make sense of the world and how to act in it
 - People value a mix of non-formal and self-directed provision for learning outside of work.

What people want to study

All subjects of current/recent learning – Top Ten, by age cohort					
17-44	%	All 45+	%	All 55+	%
Computer skills	19.3	Computer skills	31.8	Computer skills	40.6
Business studies	9.1	Foreign languages	8.1	Foreign languages	10.2
Health and medicine	8.4	Business studies	6.5	Arts	7.2
Foreign languages	4.3	Health and medicine	6.3	History	4.7
Social sciences	4.2	Arts	5.0	Religion	4.5
English language/ literature	3.8	History	3.9	Health and medicine	4.0
Engineering	3.7	Social work	3.9	Music	3.2
Science and maths	3.7	Religion	3.8	Business studies	3.1
Social work	3.2	Occupational health and safety	2.8	Social work	2.5
Communications	2.8	Communications	2.6	English language/literature	2.3

Base: all current/recent learners

How people like to study for life outside work

Forms of learning and skills development outside of work, 2008				
	Very or quite helpful %	Of some help %	Of little or no help %	Don't know %
Learning as acquisition				
Reading books, manuals and magazines	57	25	13	9
Drawing on the skills you picked up while studying for a qualification	53	26	13	9
Training courses paid for by your employer or yourself	53	21	14	12
Using skills and abilities acquired elsewhere	52	29	12	7
Using the internet	44	20	25	12
Learning as participation				
Being shown by others how to do activities or tasks	64	22	9	6
Undertaking an activity on a regular basis	60	23	10	7
Watching and listening to others while they carry out activities	57	26	11	6
Reflecting on your performance	49	31	12	7
Using trial and error	46	30	17	7

Base: all respondents (4,932)

40. Reforms need also to take account of participation patterns and the tables below illustrate a downward trend in current and recent adult learning participation as well as in adults' future intentions to learn.

Participation in learning – 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 compared							
	1996	1999	2002	2005	2006	2007	2008
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Current learning	23	22	23	19	20	20	20
Recent learning (in the last three years)	17	18	19	22	22	21	19
All current or recent learning	40	40	42	42	42	41	38
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	23	21	24	23	25	26
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36	35	34	34	36
Weighted base	4,755	5,205	5,885	5,053	4,924	4,916	5,033

Future intentions to take up learning², 2002 to 2008 compared							
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very likely	20	19	21	19	22	25	19
Fairly likely	19	20	18	20	22	18	17
Total likely	39	39	39	39	45	43	36
Fairly unlikely	10	14	12	13	14	12	14
Very unlikely	48	44	47	45	38	43	46
Total unlikely	58	58	59	57	52	55	61
Don't know	3	3	3	4	3	2	3
Weighted base	4,688	4,658	4,644	4,816	4,690	4,669	4,691

² In some years this question has been asked of all respondents. In 2005 and 2008 it was asked of all respondents who had left full-time education. Because of the electronic availability of data from 2002 onwards, it has been possible to recalculate the figures for these years. Data on future intentions to learn since 1996 are available in previous NIACE publications or on request.

Changes to the machinery

41. Realisation of the vision described is considered in the following section of the NIACE response but will call for:

- a cross-governmental initiative, (similar in kind to Better Government for Older People/Opportunity Age) to co-ordinate a programme of change, including the establishment of ministerial champions in a range of Departments;
- a new concordat between local and central government to set out new expectations and responsibilities and consequential changes to local strategic partnerships and local area agreements.

3. Realising the vision

Recognition and value

(The following section considers issues raised in questions 1f, 2a, b and c. of the Consultation document)

42. NIACE welcomes the Consultation's recognition that activities characterised as 'informal learning' are important not only to individuals but also of value to communities and the country as a whole. Academic quantitative research estimates, for example, that taking one or two non-accredited courses may increase the chances of a person giving up smoking by age 42 by a factor of well over one-eighth (from 24% to 27.3%). Similarly, an increase of 1% in the proportion of the working-age population with the old 0-level or equivalent qualifications could cut costs of crime by up to £320m annually. Thirdly, taking part in adult education is associated, statistically, not only with increased racial tolerance but greater likelihood of voting³.
43. When Government considers consultation responses, a clear focus on the full range of (multi-departmental) public benefits of informal learning as well as the private ones will be important in ensuring how best to focus policy and resources in any subsequent initiative.
44. **The Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills needs to halt the year on year real-terms loss of funding for community-based adult learning in England and the resultant shrinkage in learner numbers. It should consider also the extent to which the aims for which the Train to Gain initiative was established might be delivered through informal means as well as through the more prescriptive and less flexible arrangements currently in place.**
45. **The current safeguarded budgets represent no more than 7% of the Learning and Skills Council adult budget and 1.8% of its overall budget but is expected to meet the needs of 9 million people post-retirement; the social and personal development learning needs of the rest of the adult population, and the social/communal objectives of adult learning. NIACE believes that this is neither a proper nor reasonable sum.**
46. Giving adult learners, teachers and organisers confidence and motivation through increased investment is a precondition for a re-vitalised, innovative and creative sector. Positive rhetoric needs to be supported by resources.
47. **The reallocation of £50 million from underspending budget heads elsewhere in DIUS could be used to support a new innovation fund for**

³ Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (2008) *The Wider Benefits of Learning*, London: The Institute of Education.

informal learning and provide a kick-start to improved infrastructural support for informal learning and resources to support innovative informal learning initiatives. This would be a visible signal of Government's commitment.

48. NIACE believes that a more vibrant and developmental system can be created if the Government:
- continues to show that it values informal and non-accredited learning;
 - better understands how this kind of provision complements other kinds of adult learning; and
 - underpins this support with stable budgets and trust in those involved to use money in support of key principles and on specific activities
49. If it does so, there will be more public recognition and understanding of how the Government supports people in their learning activities.

Part of a whole system

50. NIACE believes that the Government should always remember that informal adult learning is part of a broader post-compulsory education and training ecology. It has a range of roles (described in section 2) each of which contributes to the wide-ranging government agendas described in the consultation paper.
51. Many providers in the formal sector and, (as the experience of union learning representatives demonstrates) in the workplace find that informal learning pedagogies and curricular approaches are an effective way to engage those who are 'cool' to education and training.
52. Some providers in the informal system see publicly funded informal leaning not as the provision of opportunities for the many but as a means to engage and motivate disadvantaged, under-represented or marginalised groups. Many would characterise the learning activities that support the development of vibrant and cohesive communities and the promotion of equity and social justice as an important part of such a mission and would want this to be prioritised within it. Their interest in informal learning relates to progression to higher levels of learning and skills for work, to regeneration of communities and to the improvement of health and life chances. NIACE has considerable empathy with this perspective.
53. For other informal learning providers, securing learning opportunities for the widest possible range of adults is important, offering opportunities for personal and cultural development and a public space where people from a wide range of backgrounds can explore common interests. Many providers try to do both, not least because they can cross-subsidise, using fee and pricing policies to offset disadvantage. Learning opportunities in rural areas and in mixed urban communities each offer the possibility of commonalities being experienced across social divides. There are strong connections

54. The consultation document, (and many stakeholder responses shared with NIACE) show that there are real issues with definitions about what kind of learning is formal, what non-formal and what is formal. For some students an art class is formal learning, for others, particularly if it is self-organised, it is some way along the continuum towards the informal. Similarly, the learning journey around acquiring a craft skill or musical proficiency may begin as largely recreational but go on to become a route to economic independence and cultural production.
55. Many have wished to draw a distinction between the provision of structured learning and the random learning of individuals surfing the internet or casual browsing of an exhibition. The government will need to decide at what point along the continuum the state should take on one or more of the roles identified in paragraph 22. NIACE suggests that of these roles, the provision of an infrastructure to support and promote learning, the securing of equitable access and acting as provider of last resort may be the most important.
56. On the ground, these roles are neither rigid nor permanent and result in a mix of provision that accommodates a range of learner demands and needs. At a local level, where much of this activity takes place, the Government should secure a system that breaks down the barriers between different ministerial agendas and between the skills agenda and other forms of learning and enables the joining-up of these multiple roles to provide three things:
- a proactive and comprehensive outreach system that uses informal learning both to get people onto a skills ladder and to motivate them to learn for their enjoyment, health and the benefit of their communities.
 - a means to ensure access to a range of development opportunities, whether publicly provided or secured through the private and voluntary sector. This would include things outside skills strategy priorities (such as foreign languages), that are valued by employers as well as individuals;
 - a means of bringing together and maximising use of resources for learning that are located within different government institutions and agencies and funded through different departmental budgets.
57. There needs to be recognition at national level that these things are critical elements of a successful system for wider adult learning. This means that funding for this part of the system should promote coherence at local level. The comprehensive outreach strategy advocated by NIACE would support formal learning for vocational qualifications as much as learning for personal development.
58. NIACE believes that there should be a degree of permeability across the formal/informal further education boundary. The risk of tensions and

Who pays for what?

59. In a complex system it is important for the state to be clear about what, if any, support it gives to particular learning activities or programmes. This need not be at a uniform level. NIACE would envisage that the Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills should have the overall responsibility for ensuring that all adults in England have an entitlement to fee-free access to basic literacy, language and numeracy skills, ICT as a basic skill and skills for employability. In addition the state should provide and maintain an infrastructure sufficient to support the securing of a wide range of opportunities where individuals can pay to take part. Where people are unable to pay because they are in receipt of benefit we believe the state should support participation on the grounds of equity. This might be managed through an extension of skills accounts or experiments with non-transferable vouchers allowing for a more precise targeting of support for curriculum areas (for example, modern languages) or target groups of learners (in multiply deprived wards for example) rather than blanket subsidies of provision.
60. NIACE urges the Government to avoid developing a system that gives access to a rich mix of opportunities for the relatively well off and only a restricted offer to those of more limited means.
61. The learning provided through education budgets is, however, only one (albeit major) part of the range of opportunities for learning funded by the state. As the Consultation Paper describes, many other government departments, in pursuit of their own aims, provide adult learning opportunities designed to increase healthier lifestyles, offer cultural stimulation and support community development and regeneration in rural and urban environments. Some of this learning is free, and in some cases there is a contribution from learners. In any event there is a need for such opportunities to be provided with as little overlap as possible and in a cost effective manner. Again this is best organised at local level within a framework of national expectation.

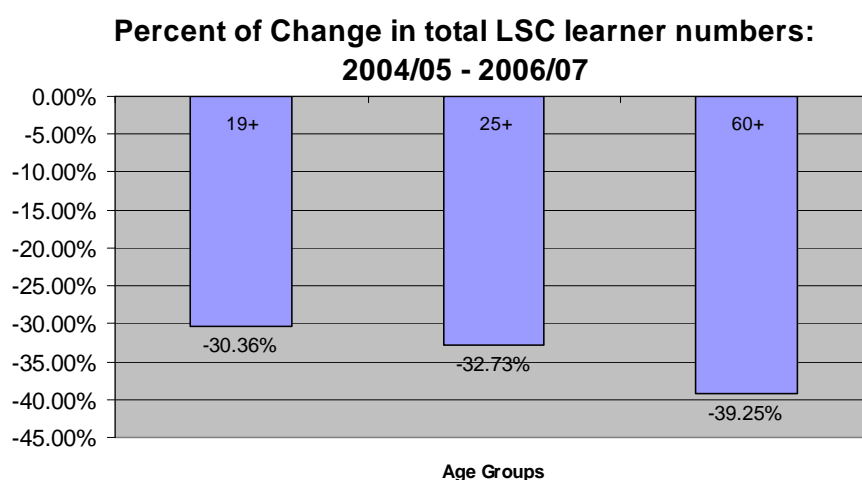
Combining breadth and depth in participation

(The following section considers issues raised in questions 3b, c, d and e and 4a, b, c, d, and e. of the Consultation document)

62. NIACE shares the Government's ambition for a far better articulation of the private, voluntary and publicly funded opportunities for adult learning within communities. Individuals are learning in new and different ways - through voluntary activity, through the broadcast media and increasingly through

the use of a wide variety of developments in technology. When thinking about groups of learners and learning communities therefore, it is important to consider not only geographical communities but also those resulting from shared interests regionally, nationally and globally. It is also necessary to consider the particular preferences of young people as well as those older adults most comfortable with the familiarity of 'the evening class'.

63. It is critical for Government to recognise how its policies impact differently on different groups of all kinds – but the example of older adults (below) serves as an illustration of how policy changes have differential impacts that may not have been anticipated..



64. NIACE is convinced that when the results of the mapping exercise commissioned as part of this consultation reports its findings it will show the wide extent of learning opportunities existing within many communities in England. NIACE expects that it will also evidence the wide range of providers involved. These may range from up-market gyms to individuals running single yoga classes in the private sector; from the professionally organised and quality assured provision of the WEA to drop-in provision run by voluntary community groups all existing alongside the provision made by local authorities, universities and FE colleges and the informal educational activities funded from other public agency budgets. The mapping that has been carried out by PCDL partnerships has already demonstrated this richness in some areas along with the difficulty of establishing a stable map of what exists.
65. However, not all communities are in this position. As a result of an area's history or circumstances, poorer communities, isolated rural areas, and most of all areas of multiple deprivation, have relatively low levels of privately- provided learning and, in the absence of a high base of fee-paying learners even public sector organisations are likely to be able to provide mainly episodic outreach opportunities and not the wide range of programmes enjoyed in more affluent communities. In contemplating a system where the private and voluntary sector are to be considered as part

of the overall pattern of provision it will be essential for the state to take up the role of 'provider of last resort' if there is not to be an unacceptable inequality in what is offered to different neighbourhoods. NIACE believes that there is a strong case for local government to play a leading role in this respect.

66. Geographical mapping alone is not enough. Individuals are creating new ways of using technology to learn about their common interests - forming different kinds of learning communities. There is a case for further research to investigate how conditions for this kind of individual and self-motivated learning are best created and promoted. The TUC's launch of a Quick Read publication (for emergent readers) in real time but also in the virtual world '*Second Life*' is an example of what is possible. The links, if any, between this and more conventional learning need to be far better mapped. There may be growing awareness of how technology supports classroom activity but more needs to be discovered about how informal learning through technology and the media leads to more formal study. This needs to be understood in order to provide suitable support and advice to prospective learners in the appropriateness of technology-based provision.
67. Private and voluntary sector providers have an important part to play in informal learning. Whilst they add to overall capacity, there has been little systematic consideration of how their work might support public goals such as widening participation in learning and the construction of effective progression routes that help adults deepen their knowledge and understanding – not least into formal further or higher education.
68. NIACE urges Government to recognise that poverty of resources and poverty of aspiration need to be addressed for private and self-organised educational opportunities to flourish in many poorer communities. Models of self-organised adult learning that work well for educated and more affluent learners may be less effective for those with little engagement in post-compulsory education. However there are many example of work (not least the Adult and Community Learning Fund) which show that where outreach support is available and needs are identified alongside communities it is possible to unleash creative solutions which overcome poverty of aspiration and the limits of public resources.
69. In meeting the needs of such communities, local authority services, voluntary bodies and colleges have an impressive record of succeeding in recruiting people from under-represented groups into targeted provision. For such groups it is essential that the education offered is of the highest quality with the support needed for progression. The guaranteed quality of Ofsted regulated provision gives these learners important support in engaging and moving on.
70. The outreach service NIACE has described above (paragraph 25) would have an important role in better integrating and promoting the initiatives of other government departments which have an informal learning element. It would identify opportunities for synergy and reduce duplication. A

71. Alongside an outreach system, NIACE urges Government to give full consideration to how progression might be better-encouraged and facilitated for those who want to take their learning further. The need for this can be illustrated by the problems in modern foreign language provision where there may be a number of courses at a lower level but much less opportunity for more advanced study. Where there are opportunities they may be privately run or self organised but not easily visible to potential learners – one function of an infrastructure should be to signpost to such opportunities.
72. It is essential opportunities for informal learning do not exclude those with learning difficulties and disabilities who have the same rights to education for personal development and enjoyment and for citizenship as everyone else. However these adults sometimes experience more difficulties in participating. It is important that the learner support arrangements within the formal further education system are mirrored to enable equal participation in informal adult learning.
73. In a system based on the expectation that participants meet all or much of the direct costs of their learning there are clearly access issues for those unable to afford fees and charges. NIACE believes that those able to pay should do so but we also believe that finance should not be a barrier to learning. We believe that people on means-tested benefits should be entitled to free or at least reduced fee provision. However NIACE would be anxious to avoid “cliff edges” and believe that providers closest to learners and their circumstances are best able to make these decisions. NIACE’s preference would be for a system that allows a high degree of local discretion over concessions. These would be funded through centrally distributed budgets with premiums in areas of greatest disadvantages and the flexibility for providers to augment this from fee income.
74. There is no question that technology is growing in importance as a support to learning and a way of learning in itself. However taking advantage of this quiet revolution does depend on access to hardware, software, time and support in the development of skills for use. This may be particularly so for older adult learners. NIACE believes that there should, at the very least, be an extension of public access to hardware through libraries, school facilities and on-line centres – but recognises that barriers caused by institutional circumstances (broadband contracts, levels of technician support for example) may be expensive to overcome.

Providing stimulating and accessible opportunities

(The following section considers issues raised in questions 1cc and e, 2e, 3b and c and 5a and b)

75. Public funding will never be sufficient to provide all adults with the education and training they seek. In many places there is already a mass of opportunities on offer where the state has had no part in provision. There is no point in public funds being used to replicate or replace such opportunities - rather they should be used to ensure the widest possible offer for people wishing to learn. People in every community are right to aspire to having access to a wide range of learning opportunities that stimulate and excite them. In addition, they should be able to expect chances to progress and extend their learning - including guidance about self-study and the use of technology to support this. There is, however, a strong defence that needs to be made for continued public support for traditional 'classes' - whether shorter or longer. Classes have an important role in demonstrating, very visibly, 'options for demand'. Learners' views of what is possible are shaped by what they believe is available close to them – a totally permissive demand led system may, paradoxically, make choice harder.
76. It may well be possible to rationalise provision currently receiving public support to make better use of public funds with a range of partly- and fully-funding models existing alongside provision totally independent of public support. However, this will require a responsive infrastructure and active management to enable the patchwork of individual learning opportunities that to be open and accessible to those seeking to learn. Publicly funded provision is currently transparently available to all. Its costs and concessions are relatively standardised within a locality. Currently it is underpinned with quality assurance and takes place within public spaces that are open to all. If this were to change into a freer, looser and less formal system with many more players, promotion and guidance would assume a greater significance. Educationally privileged adults who are confident in their ability to navigate the system may require little more than reliable information sources but those adults who have less experience beyond their initial education of consciously choosing to learn may need more assistance and guidance than market forces can provide.
77. As well as ensuring what NIACE describes as 'the common baseline' of opportunities, Government needs to identify sufficient resources (possible through a block grant) for local government to ensure a range of local learning demands are met. The intention here is to complement rather than duplicate the formal programmes of colleges and universities; people's self-organised activities and private provision.
78. The exact nature of such an offer needs to be determined in accordance with the director of local area agreements and work undertaken by local strategic partnerships. This would be supplemented by learner voices and by professional adult educators advising on issues such as access and progression. Ensuring the supply of learning opportunities in modern

languages in an area serves as an example. It is also important provision reflects the cultural diversity of all UK citizens.

79. To achieve this diversity of offer it will be important to work with the large numbers of self-organising groups that provide learning for their members or constituencies. Getting access to public spaces for these organisations to use for their provision will be one way to open their doors to more people. In an era of PFI ownership of public buildings and the contracting out of facilities management this may not be straightforward.
80. Voluntary groups provide an admirable range of opportunities but self-organisation does not guarantee quality or open access. NIACE believes that the greatest public support should be offered to voluntary groups able to demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and quality improvement.
81. In seeking to provide the widest range of opportunities, accompanied by targeted provision for those with the greatest need or at a disadvantage the government asks whether the current practice of local authority services should be regarded as outmoded and discarded and whether their vision is relevant to today's learners. In NIACE's view the best local authority services understand what is needed and have provision that is of the highest quality, targeting learners least likely to engage. These authorities would find it easiest to adapt to a new system. Other authorities have found it harder to manage conflicting government demands (both central and local). NIACE believes however that local authorities must remain key stakeholders in securing a rich mix of informal adult learning although the role they play in delivery may need redefinition.
82. When used well, information technology has the potential to open up a wide range of opportunities for informal learning. In order to make best use of technology, there remains a pressing need to ensure that all adult learners are able to learn basic ICT skills and to have access to affordable equipment – and for teachers and other intermediaries to have confidence in their own understanding of the use of technology in a learning process.
83. These needs will be ongoing because of the pace of technological change and the way in which skills can become obsolete very quickly. Government needs to have a flexible approach and develop an informal learning culture open to experimentation and continual curriculum innovation and development.

Quality in a wider system

(The following section considers issues raised in questions 1f, 3a and 3d. of the Consultation document)

84. If there is to be a system in which more and different providers are recognised by Government as having a role to play in informal adult

education, it needs to be clear what is expected of those participating. At present the situation is clear: those funded by the Learning and Skills Council are required to produce and undertake regular and systematic self-assessment with a view to being inspected by Ofsted, so that good quality can be guaranteed to those who participate. In a system where public support might be limited to securing access to a room in a school or library, or advertising in a brochure or on a website it will be important to have clarity about what is expected from the provider and this must be proportionate. It will also be essential that learners know what they can expect.

85. Here, the quality of teaching is critical. In any publicly supported system everything possible must be done to improve the quality of what is offered to the learner. NIACE believes that, there will continue to be a need for a supporting infrastructure devoted to quality improvement – able to offer professional development to staff and enable those working in informal learning to gain nationally recognised qualifications, have opportunities for updating and to be supported in their work. The approach used to train and develop Union Learning Representatives may be a helpful model in this respect. There are strong reasons for ensuring that the training and support offered to staff is part of (or broadly compatible with) the QTLS family of qualifications.
86. In the case of data, NIACE believes that this kind of learning should not be over-bureaucratized but sees an important need for collection of basic data on participation and on equality of access. Again this should be applied proportionately.

An infrastructure fit for purpose

(The following section considers issues raised in questions 3b, d and e and 4b of the Consultation document)

87. An informal learning system delivering the kind of joined up approach between private, public and voluntary learning and bridging learning delivered through DIUS budgets and those of other government departments requires a flexible infrastructure. The diagram below summarises the functions such an infrastructure will need to carry out:

A Local infrastructure for Informal Adult Learning

Promotion and Publicity for learning opportunities*	Quality Support including staff development opportunities	Outreach service and learner support*	Planning, community and learner consultation and feedback
Guidance and navigation advice and support for progression*	Access to premises, facilities and technology for learning	Distribution of funding management of funding and data	Partnerships and procurement/provision

(*Denotes cross boundary activity with more formal further education)

88. NIACE believes that such a structure needs to be at a local, not regional level and be sensitive and responsive to local needs and possibilities.
89. It would be possible to realign the provider functions of local authority adult learning services to these duties and, indeed in cases where there is contracting out, some of this process may have already started. However, passing budgets to local authorities without strings is problematic. Before 1992, local authority adult education services competed with the other priorities of hard-pressed councils (including schools' budgets). There is, however, no more appropriate or accountable custodian of public money than local government. If this issue can be resolved, the locality and connectivity with other services makes this a very attractive option. It would be important to spell out the differences between the current system and a new one.
90. Various sections of the infrastructure would have the following purposes:

Promotion

91. This function would require a far higher level of activity than is currently the case for maintaining the learndirect database or offering the existing LSC-contracted Next Steps service. There would be a need to ensure maximum public knowledge of availability, prices and status (publicly funded, voluntary, private etc). This part of the infrastructure might also run publicity and marketing campaigns to increase and widen participation. It could also work with learners in feeding back to providers and in identifying gaps in provision. Any promotional campaign should also cover the value and benefits to individuals, communities and employers of participating in learning.

Guidance and navigation

92. NIACE believes that careful consideration be given to locating this function in or alongside the new adult advancement and careers service. This would help learners navigate a system more complex

than at present. It would offer support and advice to self directed learners, advise on access to technology and also help people to find opportunities for progression and would need to be linked both to planning and learner support. Support will also be needed for the collection of diverse evidence of achievement in informal learning (for example through electronic portfolios) so that learners seeking to progress in more formal ways are not required to re-learn what they already know.

Quality Support

(The following section considers issues raised in question 5f of the Consultation document)

93. Good teaching (including the design and deployment of e-learning and digital methods) is critical to learners' success. An infrastructure should support and enhance quality across the range of provision from publicly funded to privately operated. This part of the infrastructure would do two things: offer nationally accredited training for teachers (or broker access to it) and offer mentoring and quality support in a proportionate way to private and voluntary organisations seeking it.
94. It will also be important to find ways to improve the experience for learners in self-organised learning and to ensure that vulnerable learners are given the best quality of experience. These tasks are difficult to divorce from learner support, guidance and learner feedback.

Premises and Facilities

95. Many managers of public and private facilities are reluctant to open their gates to outside users because of real or imagined concerns about health and safety, security, child protection, licensing laws, insurances or extra costs. Although many schools are community-facing, far too many more are among the most reluctant to share their resources more widely. The time may be right for Government to consider whether local authorities should regain some say over the use of school premises and facilities.
96. Overcoming these barriers can be hard for adult education professionals and may defeat many self-organising groups voluntary associations or small-scale private providers. Opening up access to premises and equipment could prove to be one of the most effective and popular ways of growing new opportunities for informal learning. A local service providing such infrastructural support would encourage more concentrated use of specialist facilities, better utilise public space and contribute to improved planning, learner support and

quality. That said, there is a limit to how much facilities can be opened up without real cost implications.

Outreach and Learner Support

97. NIACE has already stressed the centrality of outreach in a responsive, inclusive and equitable system of informal adult learning. This part of the infrastructure will need to be strongly connected to the provisions being made through the Foundation Learning Tier in formal further education and to the initiatives of other government departments. It will be a place where innovation can be expected and where imaginative approaches will be mainstreamed.
98. It will also connect with the support of individual learners to help them succeed in their endeavours. It will also be a place where issues of fee remission and concession can be addressed since these have both an individual and a group aspect. (For example, provision in some areas may be offered free to engage learners and some individuals will need concessions in order to engage in fee paying groups). It could be a place where connections with Skills Accounts can be brokered for some learners – to offer them to eligible individuals and to explore the potential of pooling accounts collectively.

Funding and data

99. This part of the infrastructure will be required to deal with the back office functions of accounting for public spending, allocating resources, monitoring budgets, and ensuring the appropriate data is collected from those involved in provision within an area. It will be closely allied with premises, promotion, procurement and partnership. NIACE suggests that data does need to be kept on specific aspects of the provision, notably on participation and on participation from disadvantaged areas but over bureaucratisation must be avoided. NIACE believes that local government represents the most appropriate way structurally of ensuring democratic accountability for public funding at local level. Providing funding in the form of a block grant through the proposed Skills Funding Agency may merit consideration as a means of ensuring that funding for informal adult learning is spent on this and not vired to meet other local needs.

Community and learner consultation and feedback

100. It is vital that communities and current and prospective learners are able to have a genuine and direct say in what is provided for them in their area and are also able to report back their experience of provision having had a sense of what are realistic expectations from it. NIACE believes that each area should be required to put in place appropriate machinery to enable this to take place and would expect it would normally have some connectivity with local strategic

partnerships. However NIACE warns against this part of the infrastructure becoming unwieldy. NIACE believes that with limited budgets most money should be spent on securing and supporting good provision and that the professional skills and experience of adult educators should be respected and used to best effect.

Partnerships and procurement/provision

101. This part of the infrastructure will need to interact closely with the functions of promotion, navigation and planning but be allied with all infrastructure functions to support the development of the widest and most accessible offer through partnerships with the range of private providers and voluntary and government agencies active within a community. It will deal with the terms of partnership with those concerned and how learners' interests can be pursued. It will also be allied closely with planning and, where there is a clearly identifiable gap in provision will either procure or provide learning activity to fill it. NIACE expects that there will occasions when such intervention may be necessary and urges the Government to make a similar assumption.
102. There are also a number of detailed issues around partnership and procurement in the specialist arena of technology-intensive learning – relating to relationships with broadcasters, ISPs, online learning providers and the specifications of particular technological platforms. In this case there need to be clear structures for dialogue at national as well as local level
103. Ensuring more effective working relationships between Departments of State is also a function that needs consideration at national level as well as at the level of Government Offices for the Regions. NIACE believes that a model such as that adopted for Better Government for Older People provides a model worth consideration.
104. Overall, NIACE believes that the kind of infrastructure described above will be needed to underpin the kind of dynamic system that is envisaged. It will require realistic costing – but once it is recognised that such an infrastructure contributes to formal further and higher education as well as informal learning, the costs and benefits can be better assessed.

4. Conclusion

105. This section summarises key features of NIACE's analysis and advice.

The role of the state in informal adult learning

The voluntary sector should be encouraged to play a growing role in meeting people's wish to engage more actively in the life of civil society. The private sector will respond to the potential to meet people's changing aspirations but the public sector has the crucial underpinning roles described below. NIACE that believes that the roles of the state should be to:

- ensure that a common baseline of adult education opportunities is available in all parts of England. This would include access to literacy, language and numeracy, ICT with the potential to be extended to include basic scientific literacy and a modern foreign language offer;
- meet the state's own priorities for adult education and training in support of its policies for economic prosperity and social inclusion/cohesion;
- empower and resource local government to respond to a range of local learning demands and needs by securing provision directly or through others;
- encourage adults to establish and maintain their own high-quality, self-organised, inclusive learning opportunities;
- secure partnership, synergy and mobility between all learning providers, formal and informal, public and private, face to face and via information and communication technologies;
- promote increased participation and innovation in and access to, formal adult learning;
- act, on behalf of learners, to secure and support paid and voluntary staff engaged in the teaching or facilitation of informal adult learning of public value.
- Encourage employers to contribute to the costs of adult learning (a responsibility under the Learning and Skills Act 2000).

(Paragraph 22).

Structural changes required

- a cross-governmental initiative, (similar in kind to Better Government for Older People) to co-ordinate a programme of change, including the establishment of ministerial champions in a range of Departments;
- a new concordat between local and central government to set out new expectations and responsibilities and consequential changes to local strategic partnerships and local area agreements. *(Paragraph 39)*
- a coherent and comprehensive outreach strategy offering the highest quality of provision to those with the greatest educational need. This strategy, in particular, should be shared and developed across the many Government departments providing informal learning opportunities as part

of their operations and activities and touch the lives of all England's diverse communities. (*Paragraph 25*)

Proper and reasonable funding

DIUS needs to halt the year on year real-terms loss of funding for community-based adult learning in England and the resultant shrinkage in learner numbers. It should consider also the extent to which the aims for which the Train to Gain initiative was established might be delivered through informal means as well as through the more prescriptive and less flexible arrangements currently in place.

Giving adult learners, teachers and organisers confidence and motivation through increased investment is a precondition for a re-vitalised, innovative and creative sector. Positive rhetoric needs to be supported by resources.

The reallocation of £50 million from underspending budget heads elsewhere in DIUS to support a new innovation fund for informal learning would indicate the significance of the Government's renewed focus on the area. (*Paragraphs 44- 47 44*).

A focus on outreach and participation

NIACE advocates the adoption of a coherent and comprehensive outreach strategy offering the highest quality of provision to those with the greatest educational need. This strategy, in particular, should be shared and developed across the many Government departments providing informal learning opportunities as part of their operations and activities and should touch the lives of all England's diverse communities. (*Paragraphs 25 and 56*).

Workforce development a priority

A skilled workforce is central to a high-quality system. This includes paid workers and also volunteers acting as facilitators, animateurs and mentors as well as teachers and trainers. This area is under-developed in the consultation paper but the topic will require considerable attention as any new system is built.

In any publicly supported system everything possible must be done to improve the quality of what is offered to the learner. NIACE believes that, there will continue to be a need for a supporting infrastructure devoted to quality improvement – able to offer professional development to staff and enable those working in informal learning to gain nationally recognised qualifications, have opportunities for updating and to be supported in their work. The approach used to train and develop Union Learning Representatives may be a helpful model in this respect. There are strong reasons for ensuring that the training and support offered to staff is part of (or broadly compatible with) the QTLS family of qualifications (*Paragraphs 70 and 85*)

A robust slim-line infrastructure for adult learning

An infrastructure, supporting entry to formal further and higher education as well as informal learning requires six functions:

- promotion and publicity for learning opportunities;
 - quality support (including staff development opportunities);
 - outreach and learner support;
 - planning and community and learner consultation and feedback;
 - guidance and navigation advice and support for progression (aligned closely with the adult advancement and careers service);
 - access to premises, facilities and technology for learning;
 - distribution of funding, management of funding and data;
 - partnerships and procurement/provision
- (Paragraphs 84 – 102)*

106. NIACE can provide the Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills with further information and comment about anything in this document. The organisation is also ready to assist the Government at any time in carrying forward the outcomes of the consultation. Please contact Sue Meyer or Alastair Thomson in the first instance.

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