

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning

## Meeting with Mark Haysom, Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Council, 17 January 2005

### Orientation

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is a public body established by the Learning and Skills Act (2000). Its three primary duties are to:

- Secure the provision of proper facilities for the education (other than higher education), training and organised leisure-time occupation connected with such education or training for people above compulsory school age but who have not obtained the age of 19;
- Secure the provision of reasonable facilities for the same purposes suitable to the requirements of people who have attained the age of 19 training;
- Encourage individuals to undergo post-16 education and training, encourage employers to participate in the provision of this and encourage employers to contribute to the costs of it.

Mr Mark Haysom took up his position as Chief Executive of the Council in October 2003 after a career in the newspaper industry.

The resource budgets of the Council, which operates only in England, were set out by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in November 2004. They are:

|                                    | 2005-06<br>(£000s) | 2006-07<br>(£000s) | 2007-08<br>(£000s) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Learning Participation             | 6,696,430          | 6,840,509          | 7,123,776          |
| School Sixth Forms                 | 2,784,400          | 1,828,900          | 1,906,400          |
| Local Intervention and Development | 195,487            | 195,487            | 195,487            |
| Capital                            | 399,800            | 474,800            | 595,800            |
| Administration                     | 245,909            | 248,179            | 235,444            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                       | <b>9,322,026</b>   | <b>9,587,875</b>   | <b>10,056,907</b>  |

The Secretary of State expects the Council to make a major contribution to two of the Government's Public Service Agreements:

- "All young people to reach age 19 ready for skilled employment or higher education"
- "Tackle the adult skills gap: increase the number of adults with the skills required for employability and progression to higher levels of training.."

## What's at issue?

The LSC has a big budget but, even so, its funds are insufficient to realise the ambitions described in the Government's policies for learning and skills. This means that its spending patterns and priorities assume heightened political significance.

NIACE believes that the LSC's interpretation of what Ministers want is often too narrow, given its statutory remit, and that its actions may, by default, damage the infrastructure for lifelong learning that has been developed since 1997. We believe that if Parliament wants to realise the full benefits of a culture of continuing education it should challenge the LSC to adopt approaches that are more inclusive, more imaginative and more sophisticated in addressing social as well as economic aspirations for the country.

The wording of the Learning and Skills Act means that the needs of 16-19 year-olds have to come first and adults get only what is left. A rise in the size of the 16-19 cohort over the next half decade and the Government's success in engaging more of them in education will squeeze the public budgets available for adults. The way 6<sup>th</sup> forms are funded creates an additional pressure while the Tomlinson proposals to reform 14-19 education will also divert funding away from adult learning.

Over the next ten years only a third of jobs created will be filled by new young entrants to the labour market. Most will be filled by adult returners (from benefits and from caring responsibilities), by people extending their engagement with the labour market into old age and by migrants. Many will still believe that 'education's for other people' and lack both up-to-date qualifications and confidence in their ability to acquire new skills and knowledge.

The upshot is that, just when economic and demographic logic calls for increased support for adult learning, public sector cash for this will be tighter than at any time since Labour came to power.

## Three Questions

### **1. Is the LSC balancing its three primary duties satisfactorily or is its vision in danger of becoming skewed?**

While government ministers are clear that the case for skills is based not only on grounds of economic competitiveness but also of social justice, the LSCs staff can sometimes give the impression that the skills strategy is a 'pick and mix' policy where the former purposes not only take precedence over the latter but that the subtleties of policy can be bleached out.

In particular, NIACE is increasingly concerned about the perception, sometimes encouraged by the LSC, that the only adult learning which counts is that which can be counted towards basic skills targets or a Level 2 entitlement. Although ministers have

ring-fenced £207 million for adult and community learning (including family learning, learning for older people, active citizenship, community development and learning through cultural activities), the re-balancing between well-resourced and poorly-resourced areas is resulting in a levelling down rather than a levelling up.

In addition the rich raft of college-based learning that is funded under the heading of 'other further education' is increasingly being withdrawn, cutting away the very opportunities that prove attractive to new or returning adult learners.

The LSC's language in concentrating on what it calls 'mainstream' learning' is indicative of the selectivity of its approach – and its policies and practice often appear inimical with its innovative and welcome duty to "encourage individuals to undergo post-16 education and training" and its failure to adopt any kind of adult participation target is telling.

## **2. Hitting the targets but missing the point is a real danger. Will the LSC's concern to meet PSA targets be at the expense of encouraging more and different adult learners?**

The PSA targets are not wrong – but they are blunt instruments that have assumed a greater importance than they deserve in driving policy and are in danger of distorting provision in unhelpful ways. Social and economic needs, whether national or local, are more complex, as recognised by the Skills Strategy but not always by the LSC's staff.

The LSC's route to the achievement of the targets is insufficiently flexible. In particular it needs to recognise the contribution that courses leading to partial achievement of a full Level 2 qualification or its equivalent can make to the target. At a time when a new credit-based system of adult qualifications looks likely to become a reality with the support of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority, LSC policies are resulting in the closure of the very kinds of courses that will be end up being re-invented. This is quite simply a case of not joining up different public policies.

An important planning tool for the LSC has been the Strategic Area Review (StAR) process. The full potential of these reviews to address, through education and training, the broader needs of communities for regeneration, capacity development and the creation of social capital and to promote equality and diversity has been too often unrealised and in certain cases has been disappointingly narrow.

## **3. Are public funds being best-used to lever-in funds from employers and individuals able to pay?**

Of course, public funding is not the only source of money. NIACE has long argued that employers should have an obligation to develop their staff. We argue, too, that those individuals who can pay should pay a higher proportion of the costs of study, as long as concessions are readily available to those who need them – whatever they are studying. The difficulty is that over the last decade, funding streams have made it sensible for colleges in particular to stimulate demand through low- or no-fee offers to individuals and employers alike. Changing direction takes time. An active fees policy will open increased funding, but only after time.

Increasing numbers of successful transnational corporations understand the value of investing in people. But many small and medium sized firms do not spend scarce money on training and development. Nor do lots of self-employed people. The

Government's Employer Training Pilots are designed to stimulate employer engagement – to use public funds to kick start a learning culture at work by supporting staff to develop those skills employers identify as critical to future success. But the early evidence of the pilots suggests that it is large multi-nationals which are quickest to respond to the opportunities the pilots. There is still a need to persuade many small firms to join in, and once there to pay more for their training.

The UK still spends less on post-16 learning than most of its competitors, when private and public investment are combined. Given the economic need for more adult learning, the case for greater investment is overwhelming. And if the Government remains wedded to voluntarism for employers, more needs to come from the public purse.

## Conclusion

The cash settlement for further education is not sufficient and has already resulted in cuts. The LSC itself has recognised the consequences of this in the internal memo to regional directors reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* of 10 December 2004 which noted 'these reductions [in budgets] will have a widespread impact and will not go unnoticed'. Nor should they!

NIACE remains wholeheartedly supportive of the aspirations of the skills strategy but if the Government remains reluctant to require more from employers, more needs to come from the public purse. Members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning may want to raise the questions considered in discussions with the LSC:

- **Is the LSC balancing its three primary duties satisfactorily or is its vision in danger of becoming skewed?**
- **Will the LSC's concern to meet PSA targets be at the expense of encouraging more and different adult learners?**
- **Are public funds being best-used to lever-in funds from employers and individuals able to pay?**

NIACE is a registered charity, founded in 1921, which represents the interests of adult learners, and of those who make provision for them, at all levels and wherever adults learn. Its membership is drawn from all sectors of post-compulsory education and training in England and Wales, and membership also includes bodies that operate wholly or partly in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

NIACE seeks to secure education systems responsive to the diversity of adults' needs and aspirations as learners, and in particular to those include who benefited least from initial education. It is our belief that a system fit for adults of all ages and in all their complexity will work better for all learners.

Contact NIACE: Renaissance House, 20 Princess Road West, Leicester LE1 6TP.

Tel: 0116 204 4200

Fax: 0116 204 4262

e-mail: [enquiries@niace.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@niace.org.uk)

web: [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

Comments about anything in this briefing should be directed to Alastair Thomson, Senior Policy Officer ([alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk](mailto:alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk)); telephone 0116 204 4241; mobile: 07787 534413.

### Disclosure of Interest:

The Director of NIACE, Alan Tuckett, is a member of the statutory Adult Learning Committee of the Learning and Skills Council and of the Government's Skills Alliance. NIACE also received almost £500,000 in contract income from the LSC in the year 2003-04.