
The Future for Lifelong Learning: A National Strategy

An independent Commission
of Inquiry sponsored by NIACE



niace
promoting adult learning

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“There is, perhaps, no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract within its particular sphere the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education ... I have no doubt myself that a man or woman earnestly seeking in grown-up life to be guided to wide and suggestive knowledge in its largest and most uplifted sphere will make the best of all the pupils in this age of clatter and buzz, of gape and gloat. The appetite of adults to be shown the foundations and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life...”

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister, 1954

“As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation.”

David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1999

“In the 21st Century, our natural resource is our people – and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.

Despite recent progress, the UK has serious social disparities with high levels of child poverty, poor employment rates for the disadvantaged, regional disparities and relatively high income inequality. Improving our skill levels can address all of these problems.”

Lord Leitch, December 2006, HMSO

“I am passionate about education because I want a Britain where there is no cap on ambition, no ceiling on talent, no limit to where your potential will take you and how far you can rise. A Britain of talent unleashed, driving our economy and future prosperity.”

Gordon Brown, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2007

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The Commission of Inquiry

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) agreed to establish and support a Commission in order to identify best practice in the UK and internationally across each of the key arenas in which adult learning makes a significant contribution, to identify the values, principles and practical steps needed to give life to lifelong learning for all the communities of the UK.

Introduction

What kind of support for adult learning is needed for a changing society and what is the role of the state in enabling it? Who should be its principal beneficiaries? What kind of knowledge needs to be valued? How should support be organised and who should pay what for it? Resolving these questions is critical to the future capacity of Britain's adults, its enterprises and its communities to adapt to rapidly-changing economic circumstances and to an increasingly diverse society.

Governments in the UK and elsewhere have wrestled with these questions periodically over the past hundred years, but technological and demographic change, coupled with an intensification of global trade and the development of a knowledge-rich economy have created a quickened sense of urgency in addressing them. This can be seen in policy papers produced by OECD, UNESCO, in the Lisbon memorandum of the European Union, and in successive policy papers produced by the UK government and its devolved administrations.

There is broad consensus running through these papers that, as Jacques Delors argued, adult learning was equally important in securing economic competitiveness and in contesting social exclusion. In the UK there is broad agreement that the education and training of the adult population is important for maintaining the economic prosperity of all parts of the UK in an increasingly globalised world; for promoting social cohesion and inclusion within a society that is increasingly diverse; and for the well-being of individuals, families and communities seeking opportunities to fulfil their potential.

There is, however, little consensus on how best limited public funding should be spent to secure progression in education, and the development of 'economically valuable skills' for adults, and to secure the widest range of other social policy benefits (among them better health, enhanced civic engagement, improved levels of social cohesion, cultural enrichment, greater social mobility, and an increased sense of well-being). Too often, public policy lurches on a continuum between red-blooded utilitarianism and an all-embracing, if utopian, permissiveness.

Demographic, industrial and technological changes make the development of a strategy for lifelong learning ever more important to future economic prosperity. Research evidence of the intrinsic and social benefits deriving from adult learning is ever clearer. Yet current provision is weakening and fragmenting.

In this context, NIACE believes that work towards an informed and authoritative strategy is of vital importance, and has as a result instigated this Commission of Inquiry.



A Strategy for the Inquiry



Background and Policy Context

Without a broad adult learning curriculum, accessible to all, current policy aspirations to secure a prosperous, fair and sustainable future are unlikely to be realised.

- Skills development among the workforce can contribute to economic competitiveness and bring greater economic prosperity for individuals, employers and the country.
- Learning has an important role to play in enabling both personal and community development: transforming lives and enhancing the capacity of individuals to find fulfilment, whilst fostering an informed democracy, respect for diversity and difference and resilience in the face of change.
- Adult learning can contribute to the pursuit of a range of other social policy objectives, such as improved health, active ageing, crime reduction, community cohesion and participation in cultural activities.

Adult learning not only brings private benefits to individuals and employers. It also has a public value for society in that it has an impact on our broad economic and social policy priorities. As a society, we are experiencing change on many fronts, and issues such as new technologies, shifts in demographic structures, the intensification of global trade and changing notions of work are raising new challenges that adult learning can help to address.

Over the past decade, the prevailing direction of public policy on adult learning has been to focus increasingly on skills. The 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age* outlined a vision for a national strategy for lifelong learning which has since been superseded by a skills strategy that stresses the need to develop a skilled workforce and places a particular emphasis on learning in the workplace.¹ As a result, attention to, and resources for, other kinds of adult learning have diminished. Recent data from the Learning and Skills Council confirm the loss of a million adults from publicly-funded provision in just two years.

¹DfES (2003) *21st-Century Skills: realising our potential* (Cm 5810); DfES (2005) *Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work* (Cm 6483).

During the Spring and Summer of 2006, NIACE conducted a 'Big Conversation' on the planning, funding and provision of adult learning. The findings from that conversation highlighted the pressing need for a major strategic review of adult learning. A new strategy for lifelong and life-wide learning is needed that will both articulate and maximise the contribution that adult learning can make to securing a sustainable future, characterised by economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social justice, social cohesion and well-being in the 21st century.

New policy drivers that will have increasing importance over the coming months have also become apparent since the inception of the Brown premiership, and have major implications for the development of a new agenda for adult learning:

- The **Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007** will see a slowing-down of the rate of growth in expenditure across the public services. It will also introduce a new streamlined Public Service Agreement (PSA) framework of just 30 outcome-focused PSAs, all of which will require inter-departmental collaboration. For adult learning, this will mean a combined skills and employment PSA focused on supporting people into work; and an overall measure of economic growth for Regional Development Agencies. It will be crucial to position adult learning early and effectively as an important contributor to a number of the new PSAs – those related to social and environmental, as well as economic, objectives.

The Treasury has also promised a reduction in supporting indicators, though the devil is likely to be in the detail here. Early signs are that qualifications will continue to act as a proxy measurement for skills development. On the other hand, there is a significant emphasis on simplifying business support arrangements, including skills, which could open up opportunities for employers to develop and implement more strategic, flexible and tailored workforce development strategies.

- The **reform agenda of the new Government** which has already been indicated in changes to the machinery of government and in the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration, July 2007. Local communities will have more power and voice to determine needs and priorities for their communities; and mechanisms for connecting localities, sub-regions, regions and the centre will be strengthened. A single regional integrated strategy will be produced by each region, balancing economic, social and environmental objectives.



Aims and Objectives of the Commission

The challenge for adult learning will be to articulate its contribution to the Brown Government's twin goals of economic prosperity and social justice, and continue to make the case for quality of life and well-being to be a key theme in local, regional and national policy-making. Adult learning needs to be positioned as a 'golden thread' running through a range of policy themes: health and well-being, culture and quality of life, community cohesion, social justice, sustainable communities, prosperous regions and environmental sustainability. And it needs to be positioned strategically at local, sub-regional, regional and national levels.

- **Increasing focus on social justice and social mobility.** Ten years on, many targets – including the ambitious Skills for Life targets – have been met through a combination of increased resources and short-term quick-wins strategies. But both the Sub-National Review and *World Class Skills* recognise that there remain some intractable social exclusion problems – including, in particular, how to get more people into work.

In terms of supporting this policy priority, the issues for those involved in adult learning are (1) how to support effectively people close to the labour market to progress into and within sustainable employment; (2) how to support effectively people furthest from the labour market to engage in purposeful learning journeys; (3) how to work collaboratively with other social partners to provide an holistic response to people's needs; and (4) how adult learning can encourage greater social cohesion and support the development of sustainable communities where people stay and thrive.

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has agreed to establish and support an independent Commission of Inquiry to undertake a major strategic review of adult learning. Its purpose is to look at the critical issues that will face our society during the coming decades, and identify how adult learning can equip us to respond to these challenges.

The ultimate aims of the commission are three-fold:

- To effect a cultural shift in the value attached by policy-makers and the public to adult learning.
- To offer new perspectives on adult learning policy and practice to institutions and employers.
- To offer an authoritative and coherent strategic framework that will maximise the contribution that adult learning policy and practice can make towards securing a future characterised by economic prosperity; social justice, social cohesion and personal well-being; and environmental sustainability in the UK.

In working towards these aims, the Commission will:

- undertake a detailed assessment of evidence from the UK and beyond, including commissioned research and analysis and the collection of written and oral evidence;
- identify the values, key features and priorities that should underpin a national strategy;
- make recommendations on what is necessary to implement a national strategy; and
- through its inclusive deliberative processes, build consensus and support for the resulting national strategy and engage a range of powerful voices across the public, private and voluntary sectors to advocate for the new agenda for adult learning.

In order to ensure that the debate is not constrained by the limitations of current structural arrangements, the Commission proposes to adopt a thematic approach to exploring the issues. Eight key themes have been identified, and considering the implications of these for future adult learning policy will provide the focus for the inquiry:



The Work of the Commission

Structural themes:

- Globalisation of markets and the interdependence of nation states and the effects of these trends on learning, work and prosperity.
- Demographic change including the learning needs generated by an ageing society, migration, changing career and family patterns and the needs of future adults.
- Technological change and its consequences for provision of and access to learning.

Public policy themes:

- Poverty reduction.
- Well-being and happiness.
- Citizenship and belonging in a diverse society.
- The future role of the public, private and voluntary / third sectors.
- Environmental sustainability.

The Commission's work will be serviced by a secretariat drawn from the staff of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education but its work programme and report will be independent of NIACE.

The Commissioners will approve a work-plan and receive reports and papers for analysis.

Timescale

The work of the Commission commenced with an inaugural meeting on 25 September 2007 and it is anticipated that conclude by March 2009, a period of 18 months.

A further three meeting dates have been agreed so far:

- 27 November 2007;
- 7 February 2008; and
- 8 May 2008.

Outputs and dissemination

The work of the Commission was launched in September 2007. The Commission will:

- produce commissioned papers and other research which will be published electronically to stimulate and inform public debate;
- hold periodic open debates, seminars, learner events and public conferences, as well as stakeholder briefings, to provide comment and feedback for the Commissioners;
- publish an interim report (autumn 2008);
- publish a final report to be drafted by secretariat staff working with the Commission and signed off by the Commissioners;
- hold a major ministerial conference in the spring of 2009 to launch the final report;
- disseminate the findings through NIACE's networks, through Adult Learners' Week, through evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Lifelong Learning and Skills, and seeking widespread coverage for its work. The findings will be disseminated to all Sector Skills Councils, to leaders and staff in higher education institutions; colleges, work-based learning and local authority adult education providers; to voluntary organisations and employer bodies; to the press and broadcast media, political parties and professional associations.



Throughout the life of the Commission, the NIACE press office will work with the Commission's Chair to generate media coverage of its work so as to have an impact upon policy debate and formation.

The secretariat will maintain links with government and parliament in the UK, its devolved administrations and the European Union to ensure that opportunities to contribute to consultations and inquiries are drawn to the Commission's attention.

Commissioners

The Commission Chair

Professor Sir David Watson has accepted an invitation from the Board of NIACE to chair an independent Commission.

David Watson is an historian and Professor of Higher Education Management at the Institute of Education, University of London and a member of the Board of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Prior to this he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brighton (1990–2005), a member of the Higher Education Funding Council (England) and of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee).

Members

A further ten experts have been invited by the Chair and NIACE to join the Commission, and have agreed. The group includes people with experience in government, business, public service and academia from across the UK.

[Carol Bannerman](#), Principal, Bolton College

[John Field](#), Director for the Division of Academic Innovation and Continuing Education, University of Stirling

[Bob Fryer](#), National Director for Widening Participation in Lifelong Learning, Department of Health

[Leisha Fullick](#), Pro-Director, Institute of Education.

[Clare Hannah](#), Learning and Development Director, First Bus Group

[Murziline Parchment](#), Director of Major Projects and Service, Greater London Authority

[Teresa Rees](#), Pro-Vice Chancellor, Cardiff University

[David Sherlock](#), President of NIACE

[Nick Stuart](#), Chair, NIACE Company Board

[Tom Wilson](#), Head of Organisation Services, TUC

Secretariat

[Fiona Aldridge](#), Development Officer (Research), NIACE

[Sue Meyer](#), Director for Programmes and Policy, NIACE

[Helen Plant](#), Senior Research Officer, NIACE

[Tom Schuller](#), Director for the Inquiry, NIACE (from February 2008)

[Alan Tuckett](#), Director, NIACE

[Jenny Williams](#), Regional Development Officer (South East), NIACE

Funding and Sponsorship

NIACE is committed to undertaking the work of the Commission and will commit a proportion of its own reserves to that end.

It calculates that the budget for the central work of the Commission, and the draft of the final report, will approach £1 million.

NIACE seeks a partner or partners to sponsor specific events and/or publications that will support and feed into the Inquiry's work.

Sponsors will receive a package of opportunities as a result of sponsorship that may include some or all of the following:

- badging on documents, seminars and conferences;
- an observer's seat at meetings of the Commission;
- places and opportunities to contribute at seminars and conferences, and to exhibit where appropriate; and
- inclusion in press strategy arising from the Commission.

Conclusion

On behalf of Sir David Watson and the Commission, NIACE invites potential sponsors and supporters of its remit to contact the Institute.



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