



Lifelong learning in challenging times

An agenda for a new government

Introduction

The new government, of whatever political complexion, faces a range of challenges:

- financial – to ensure effective recovery from global recession;
- demographic – to prepare for half a million fewer young people entering the labour market in the coming decade, a rapidly growing older population and greater international labour market flexibility;
- technological – to harness the power of technology to match or exceed the pace of innovation and entrepreneurialism of our trading partners;
- environmental – to secure a low carbon economy and greater sustainability;
- social – to secure social justice, community cohesion, and to minimise the negative impacts of inequality;
- democratic – to encourage active citizenship and strengthen trust in representative democracy locally and nationally.

To meet these challenges the United Kingdom needs an adult population that is:

- confident and capable;
- engaged and empowered;
- enterprising and curious;
- cultured and reflective; and
- tolerant and inclusive.

We need a society which ensures social justice for all and which celebrates diversity. In short, we need a learning society where:

- there is widespread understanding and confidence that we can learn our way out of our current difficulties, and lay the foundations for a future that values the contributions everyone can make to well-being and prosperity; and
- everyone can see what they can contribute to make vibrant and inclusive communities, entrepreneurial, innovative and successful businesses and public services, and to making the world a better place for our children.

To that end NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, believes we need a national strategy for lifelong learning, backed by stable organisational structures, with national leadership combined with enough autonomy to support local decision making to fit local circumstances.

In 2007 NIACE commissioned an independent inquiry into the future of lifelong learning to prepare the ground. Its final report, *Learning through life* was published in September 2009,¹ and NIACE endorses its key recommendations, which are to:

- base lifelong learning policy formation on a new model of the educational life course, with four key stages (up to age 25, age 25–50, age 50–75, and those aged 75+);
- re-balance resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages;
- build a set of learning entitlements for adults;
- engineer flexibility by developing a system of credit across post-compulsory education and training, and by encouraging part-time study;

¹ More information about the inquiry report *Learning through life* can be found at: www.niace.org.uk/news/learning-through-life

- improve the quality of work rather than the volume of qualifications;
- construct a curriculum framework for citizens' capabilities;
- broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce;
- revive local responsibility within national frameworks; and
- make the public system more intelligent.

Each recommendation was backed by detailed work and none assumed an increase in spending overall.

Addressing the challenges highlighted above will involve major cultural change – to find ways of engaging everyone in learning at key points of change and development in their lives. This has long been an aspiration of governments, but the need is now urgent. NIACE believes that failures in the banking sector must not be allowed to deflect the UK from investing in lifelong learning that will help avoid such problems in the future.

Since 1997 spending on further education has increased by 52 per cent, but that increase was concentrated in the early years of the government and has been focused overwhelmingly on those aged 18–25. For learning responsive to adults over 25, resources have stagnated or reduced, and there are over 1.5 million fewer publicly supported adult learners than there were in 2004. Meanwhile, employer investment overall remains concentrated on the already well-qualified.

In higher education there remains 'unfinished business' about the differential treatment of full- and part-time study in respect of fees and maintenance support, as well as how the UK pays for a mass system in an increasingly global higher education economy.

Reducing public expenditure on lifelong learning would be a wholly counterproductive measure. It would have the effect of reducing the UK's economic competitiveness as well as resulting in higher costs in such areas as health, criminal justice and community cohesion.

Existing resources can be better used by balancing them in a more sophisticated way to maximise a wider range of public benefits.

Three key principles

1. Inclusivity – every adult matters

One test which NIACE uses to evaluate policy proposals impacting on adult education and training is the extent to which they help those adults who have benefited least from their initial learning and who face particular barriers to study. These include:

- part-time and temporary workers for whom time for formal learning is a major problem since it will seldom, if ever, be in the interest of employers to prioritise their skills development;
- those employed in businesses which are ‘cool to training’ who will not be reached by initiatives such as Train to Gain;
- older people – whether those in work needing to extend participation in the labour market, the active retired or older people needing care;
- migrants, whose potential contribution may not be recognised by employers unfamiliar with a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce with skills but not qualifications recognised in the UK;
- women disadvantaged by gendered education, training and employment opportunities, especially those from ethnic minority communities culturally resistant to high levels of female employment outside the home;
- people currently on welfare benefits – including those on incapacity benefits as a result of mental ill-health;
- ex-offenders; and
- adults with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy.

Adults such as these are unlikely to profit from a greater reliance on marketisation within post-initial education and training.

Because of the UK’s changing demographic profile, NIACE believes special consideration must be given to educational opportunities for older people. For those aged 50–75, learning has a role to play in supporting prolonged economic activity; and for all older adults it can make a marked contribution to the quality of life – it has positive impacts on well-being and physical health which generate massive quantifiable savings in health and social care costs. For these reasons, NIACE believes that the new government should consider the introduction of an older learners’ entitlement.

NIACE believes that policies which realise the contribution of people who are at risk of marginalisation and exclusion will be of both economic and social benefit to all.

2. Equitable contributions

Building a learning society will require increased investment by everyone – individuals, employers and government alike. But for this to happen there needs to be greater equity:

- in the distribution of opportunity across the whole life course;
- between the resourcing of further and higher education;
- between the fees and support for part-time and full-time study; and
- in the way employers’ and employees’ contributions are recognised.

Although the general education of the adult population results in quantifiable public benefits, it also brings private benefits

to individuals. For this reason NIACE believes that all those who can afford to contribute to the cost of learning should do so in proportion to the benefit received and the ability to pay, and that public support should not be used to further enhance the privileges of the most advantaged. A national system of learning accounts could form the basis of personalised entitlements.

NIACE also believes public money should not be used to displace existing private sector spending – and that it is the job of employers to train staff for their current and anticipated economic activities. State support for employers should focus on strategically important or emerging industries, innovation in the delivery of education and training and its dissemination, and widening participation.

In order to drive up levels of skill in the workplace, NIACE is attracted to sectoral or occupational 'licence to practice' initiatives as means of raising levels of competence, standards and productivity. The advantage of industry-wide approaches is that organisations committed to training suffer no competitive disadvantage against those which poach trained staff.

In terms of public institutions for education and their financing, NIACE believes that there should be a public commitment by government over the life of new Parliament to begin to develop a tertiary system that brings further and higher education closer together.

3. Curricular breadth

The public benefits of education and training are not limited to particular subjects or levels of study. They can be measured in the behaviours and attitudes of adults who identify themselves as learners – whether that is through high-level formal study, vocational training, informal learning in community settings or independent study using new technology.

The state cannot be expected to meet all the learning aspirations of adults nor should it presume to micro-manage resources. NIACE believes that it is reasonable for 80 per cent of public spending to focus on government priorities (determined in dialogue with employment interests) and that the remaining 20 per cent should be determined by learners themselves (through the direction of resources through learning accounts) and by approved providers of education and training responding to local and regional need.

Building adults' capabilities

NIACE believes that the new government should introduce a common curriculum framework which would represent the state's offer to its adult population. As well as vocational and academic knowledge and skills this would include measures to build:

- health capability;
- financial capability;
- civic capability; and
- digital capability.

Rather than framing this as a prescriptive 'national curriculum' NIACE advocates a more decentralised approach which would allow local decision-making to determine how such capabilities should be developed given local needs and aspirations.

The capability of adults to be good parents, grandparents or carers is the final part of this mosaic. Families have more impact on the educational success of children than do schools. And family and intergenerational learning has a positive impact on the life chances of children and adults alike so NIACE urges the new government to take an expansive approach to family policy in respect of learning by ensuring that the needs of adults are given parity with the learning needs of children.

But there is more to learning than institutionally provided activity. Learning and building people's capacity is at the heart of community-shaped strategies for regeneration and employment and in the evolution of creative, innovative workplaces. NIACE is committed to supporting learning-rich activity throughout civil society, in enterprises, public services and voluntary associations alike.

Conclusion

As an independent charity, NIACE has benefited from a formal compact with central government that allows it to comment on public policy as a 'critical friend'. NIACE looks forward to working with the new government to ensure that lifelong learning contributes effectively to meeting the challenges facing the country.

For further information about the issues discussed in this paper, visit www.niace.org.uk or contact alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk

A pdf of this paper may be downloaded from www.niace.org.uk/agenda2010

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This document is intended primarily for use in England.
Education and training are devolved responsibilities and
there are no Assembly elections in Wales in 2010.