



University and College Union

‘Further, higher, better’

**Submission to the government’s
second Comprehensive Spending
Review**

Section 16

16 Adult and community learning

Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown

'Workers will on average change jobs seven times during a working life, and the vast majority of today's workers will need to train or retrain for tomorrow's skills.'⁹⁶

Gordon Marsden MP

'The demographics over the next ten to 15 years are going to invert the pyramid, or the trapezium, if you like, of learning, and you really are going to have a massive new cohort of people who are going to need to be re-skilled and retrained in their forties and fifties.'⁹⁷

While the total number of students aged 16-18 in full-time equivalents (FTE) in England is forecast to rise by 9.2% between 2004-5 and 2007-8, the total FTE for adults is forecast to fall by 4.8% over the same period.⁹⁸ Although full level 2 places delivered through the National Employer Training Programme and mainstream FE will be increasing by more than a quarter of a million, the number of publicly funded places on shorter courses which do not lead to national qualifications is likely to fall by around 500,000 by 2007-8.⁹⁹

The financial impact of this is to be offset partly by colleges offering programmes at full cost. Although overall funding levels increased by 4.3%, we note that the allocations by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for 2005-6 saw a 3% reduction in funding for further education for people in the 19+ age range.¹⁰⁰

Comment

We are concerned at the planned reduction in funded places on courses that do not lead to national qualifications, and the reduction in funding for further education for people aged over 19. We consider that these are retrograde steps.

Not all the education and training that these adults will require over the next decade will be on a course that leads to a national qualification. There will be a continuing need for diverse provision of education for adults.

Furthermore, one of the key themes of the government's 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review is the increase in the population reaching retirement age. Adult education has a key role to play in contributing to the well-being of the 'baby boom' generation. There are significant benefits in health terms of senior citizens being able to participate in adult education, not only in terms of personal intellectual development. It is vital that old people maintaining a good social network, and participation in adult education helps in this. Contribution to the well-being of retired people is likely to reduce costs in other sectors of the economy, particularly health.

In recent years there have been a number of negative and even perverse outcomes in the funding of adult learning. These result partly from providers being 'too successful' in the context of a finite LSC budget and exceeding their targets both for growth in adult learners and for 16-19 year olds, and partly from the known priority of the government for work with 16-19 year olds and the in-built legislative bias towards young people that was written into the Learning and Skills Act 2000. There have also been some negative effects on provision from changes to the funding methodology for adult and community learning. This has meant variable levels of provision for adults between different colleges and services and between different local Learning and Skills Councils. We believe that the welcome guarantees given for adult and community learning in the first Skills White Paper June 2003 may have been seriously undermined.

We do not disagree with the government's priorities for adult learning in directing scarce resources to those most in need: adults without basic skills, and those in the workforce without a full level 2 qualification. We do not demur from the view that these are the prerequisites for further skills acquisition, including gaining qualifications at level 3 and above, which are those the economy most needs. However it is becoming increasingly evident that these policies need to be part of a well-rounded set of policies that include skills generation at all levels.

The government's intention to shift the balance of contributing the costs of adult learning to those who have already benefited from previous learning experiences is being implemented partly through the priority being given to learning programmes leading to full level 2 and basic skills qualifications, but also through increasing the fees that providers charge to those studying on level 3 and higher programmes. As far as we are aware this policy has not been based on evidence and we are fearful that the long term impact may be a fall in the numbers enrolling on these programmes because employers may be reluctant to pay for the increased costs, especially when they are being offered free level 2 programmes through the National Employer Training Programmes. Many low paid individuals who look to level 3 qualifications to move to better paid employment will not be able to afford the new increased fees. The result may be that level 3 programmes may have to close if they fail to recruit sufficient learners. Colleges saw a similar perverse outcome in the 1990s when the Further Education Funding Council funding methodology drove many providers to close down expensive workshop and practical programmes.

The negative results of these policies can now be seen in the shortage of certain skills, such as engineering and construction. We must preserve the progression opportunities for those currently taking up the level 2 entitlement and those who will do so in the near future.

There is a tightening financial squeeze on funding for many adult programmes. This issue needs addressing. Indeed we consider that the whole area of adult learning funding and its relationship to skills generation, and

meeting the government's goals, is an area which the government could usefully investigate. There might also be a fruitful investigation of whether the limits of voluntarism, or even post-voluntarism, in skills generation have been reached.

Fundamentally this concerns the amount of resources the country is willing to invest in learning and skills. It may well be that the limits of state funding are being reached in this area. However it is not clear whether employers - the other main possible source of resources and amongst the chief beneficiaries of skills generation - are willing to invest more of their own resources in what remains a voluntarist system. We argue that the kind of demand-led system as outlined in the two Skills White Papers can only be achieved with a range of statutory measures, including some legislative extension of the right to include training in collective bargaining, greater use of 'licenses to practice', even a limited right to paid educational leave perhaps combined with fiscal incentives to employers to train and upskill.

Further to our proposal for an investigation into funding for adult education, we note the recommendation in the Foster Review that: 'The Government should bring together building blocks, of a national learning model spanning schools, FE and HE, and underpinning context and assumptions into a single document which is published on a regular basis. This document should set out greater clarity about what the public purse will support in full, what the public purse will subsidise and what the Government considers individuals and employers might pay for in full.' (p. 88)

We welcome this recommendation. The plethora of initiatives relating to further education and skills is becoming a barrier to FE colleges in being clear about their role. Clarity is much needed.

We concur with the Association of Colleges in its *Manifesto 2005*, in the necessity for: 'a commitment to a national entitlement to adult learning in every community, including courses for those with poor basic skills and courses in maths, English, IT, languages, citizenship and practical crafts in every community in the country. Action is needed to encourage adults who can afford it to devote time and money to learning, At the same time, financial aid is needed to help adults meet necessary childcare, transport and study costs.'