



**University and College Union**

**‘Further, higher, better’**

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

**Section 1**

# 1 Introduction

## Further, adult and offender education

Further, adult and offender education make a significant and growing contribution to the economy through skills education, providing a second chance at education, and promoting inclusion.

The further education sector is at the heart of skills training in the UK, with rising numbers of young people and adults gaining good vocational qualifications. Further education plays a significant role in the government's Apprenticeships programme, and in equipping more than a million learners in basic literacy, numeracy and language skills.

Adult education contributes enormously to skills development, and to enhancing the quality of life of hundreds of thousands of learners. Prison and offender education has moved to the centre of policy and practice in the area of rehabilitation of offenders and the prevention of re-offending.

Further education has a key role to play in social justice and inclusion, giving disadvantaged people another opportunity for education. As the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, said in his 2006 Budget speech, the sector provides, for those who have missed out on their first chance in education, 'a second chance to make the best of themselves'.

The 2006 White Paper, *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances*, emphasised the recent achievements of the further education sector.

'Recent improvements in results achieved by the education and training system owe a great deal to FE: the significant increase in the proportion of 19 year-olds achieving level 2 qualifications – up 3 percentage points to 69.8%; the improvement in completion rates for full Apprenticeship frameworks from 31% in 2003/4 to 40% in 2004/5; the recent increase in post-16 participation to new record levels; and the overall improvement in success rates in FE from 59% in 2000/01 to 72% in 2003/04.' The White Paper continued: 'Those improvements are a tribute to the skill, dedication and hard work of all those working in the FE system.'<sup>11</sup>

The quality of further education colleges is high. Just 2% of colleges are judged by Ofsted to be inadequate, compared to 20% in 2001. Although the 2006 White Paper proposed for 'failing' colleges the possibility of opening provision up to competition from the private sector, in response, UCU's Barry Lovejoy has said: 'We don't agree that FE is ripe for private organisations to make a quick buck. It has been shown that where problems of quality are identified, they can be turned round very quickly.'

Nevertheless, there are significant challenges for the sector, particularly in raising the proportion of young people staying on in post-16 education and training; in raising the proportion of young adults gaining a level 3 qualification in their early twenties; and in the number of adults in the workforce without appropriate skills for employment.

The government – through its strategy for 14-19 education reform, and its adult skills strategy – has ambitious targets for increasing the numbers of participants to 90% of 16-19 year-olds; for increasing those with level 2 and 3 qualifications; for increasing the numbers completing Apprenticeships; and for improvements in adult literacy and numeracy skills.

We welcome the steps taken by the government in 2006 to provide free further education to level 3 for those aged 19-25. We see this measure playing an important part in starting to meet the challenges mentioned above. We look too for the government to work with school providers to tackle pre-16 underachievement.

Significant investment is needed to provide the resources for likely expansion and specialisation by colleges, for adequate up-to-date learning facilities and infrastructure, for the enhancement of quality and for adequate continuing professional development for the staff who will be providing further education.

However, in the government's prioritising of 14-19 reform to help people gain the skills and qualifications for employability, and the 'reconfiguration of the system around this mission' and 'strengthening the focus of the system as a whole on a core economic mission with increasing specialisation in colleges',<sup>12</sup> we are concerned that older learners, particularly post-25, do not lose out, and that adult and community provision is not priced beyond the disadvantaged.

## **Higher education**

The quality of provision by higher education institutions in the UK is well documented, through the Quality Assurance Agency and its forerunners, as well as through external examiners, and now through students' opinions in the Teaching Quality Information exercise.

The quality of research in UK HEIs has been attested repeatedly through the Research Assessment Exercise, as well as through citation analyses and the international recognition given to approximately 90 UK academics – or people who have worked for a significant period in UK higher education – who have won Nobel prizes. The new knowledge generated over the past century and more in UK universities has literally changed the world we live in.

The contribution of universities to the economy of the UK is also well-documented. A report for Universities UK in 2002, cited in the government's 2003 higher education white paper 'The future of higher education', said £35bn of output in the UK was dependent on higher education, more than half a million full-time equivalent jobs in the UK were generated by HEIs, and that

for every 100 jobs created directly within a HEI, another 80 are generated elsewhere in the economy across all sectors.<sup>13</sup>

UK higher education has coped with a massive increase in student numbers in the past 20 years. The student-to-staff ratio has more than doubled. But quality has been maintained in all but a tiny number of instances. Graduates of UK universities go on to make a significant contribution to our society and economy, bringing knowledge and skills that help build civic society and strengthen our national livelihood.

### **Comment**

In short, there are many success stories in further and higher education in the UK. But there are significant challenges, too. Skills levels remain low in a number of areas, and do not compare well with international competitors. Access to further and higher education needs to be increased, and there needs to be wider participation by learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Quality needs to be maintained and enhanced. Infrastructure for learning, teaching and research needs to be continually updated. Staff need adequate levels of pay, and adequate provision for continued professional development.

The aim of the rest of this document is to analyse further, adult, offender and higher education in the UK to see where investment needs are, and to put forward ideas for the continued development of post-16 education.