



Photo: Ed Mellia

During the affluent noughties it was sometimes said of government that it had ‘more visions than Mystic Meg and more pilots than British Airways’. In 2011, the pilots, the pathfinders, the new initiatives are largely gone – implementation is the name of the game – but the visions remain. The latest one, as it affects adult learners, is in the ministerial foreword to the *New challenges, new chances* consultation, published last month. The question is: will the implementation match up to the rhetoric? Especially as the delivery of the vision will be made at a local level.

John Hayes’s vision statement, as the government asks providers and members of the public what *they* think, is an inspiring one. The most noticeable thing to me is that he talks about ‘people’. Gone is the language of students and learners, which focuses disproportionately

in their community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents, at work and as citizens.

This is not a million miles away from the current consultation in which John Hayes says: ‘Learning and its consequences feed purposeful pride. It helps people feel a new sense of purpose and pride in the present and hope for the future.’

Of course, the big criticism of the 1998 vision was that it never had the chance to be realised; the implementation process did not match up to the vision (and this at a time with

New term, new vision?

Any vision for adult learning has to be a local one, shaped and implemented by those on the ground, argues **MARK RAVENHALL**

on the concerns of those already in the system. Mercifully absent too is the language of ‘potential’ and ‘non’ learners. There is even less emphasis on the phrase ‘employers and individuals’. Talking about ‘people’ in the round is important as it starts from the everyday concerns of members of the public and links those concerns with learning.

Colleagues working in adult education services and colleges have drawn comparisons between this most recent vision and David Blunkett’s introduction to the 1998 Green Paper, *The Learning Age*; in terms of its support both for the sector and for its wider social as well as economic role. You will recall the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment writing:

Learning enables people to play a full part

a more unified governance of the education of adults: one department, just two funding agencies). It wasn’t long before more visions came along: Foster’s view of colleges’ main role being in economic development, and Leitch’s oversimplification of the links between productivity and skills; skills and qualifications. David Blunkett’s ‘renaissance’ came to be transformed into the narrow utilitarianism of ‘It’s the economy, stupid.’

As we know, all this resulted in an implementation system based on ‘full-fat qualifications’ and target-setting that led to the assessment of current skills, often at the expense of any actual learning. More worryingly, the centralisation of implementation led to an expectation that government would pick up the tab for delivery. Government funding displaced employer investment – as

the fees target became less important than the achievement of qualifications.

So what we have now, finally, in 2011, is the realisation that micro-management does not work and that government needs to let go. But how can that be achieved? How does government implement a plan for 'letting go'?

For me, there are three main elements to how the current vision will be implemented.

The first of these is how you get people (individuals and employers) to pay their *fair* share. The 'F' word is important here: the thinking is that state funding should be for those who would otherwise be unable to access learning, whether in a college, university, the workplace or wider community. The tried-and-tested (but recently contested) approach to this has been through loans for higher education. From 2013 this looks likely to be applied in further education at Level 3 for adults 24 and over. This is based on the assumption that FE learners are the same as their HE counterparts. But while the HE undergraduate cohort is largely full-time, under 24 and progressing straight from school and college, FE Level 3 students over the age of 24 tend to be part-time, adults balancing the work, family and community commitments – sometimes even with children themselves at university. Clearly, some market research needs to be done.

The other reason for the state to invest in adult learning is that society as a whole benefits from that investment. Hence the policy of full fee remission for courses at certain levels, as well for those actively seeking employment.

That's who's in. But who will be missing as we start a new term? It looks like people on so-called 'inactive benefits' who may not be in a position to seek work will be the main losers. People for whom English is not their first language, and those with disabilities are likely to be hardest hit unless funding from other government departments or from local authorities can be mobilised. There are encouraging signs across the country, as the crisis has brought learning providers and local authorities together to make a case that this learning supports community cohesion, health, wellbeing and independent living.

My second area is 'Informal Adult and Community Learning' (as it is now inaccurately known – most of it is not 'informal' in terms of the definition used by educators across the world). This accounts for seven per cent of the total adult skills budget but provides for a quarter of all learners. Of course, no system can be judged by participation alone – most of these

learners are very part-time – but they are also a group that tends to pay its fair share of the costs of learning. They tend not to see it as the state's role solely to provide. There are therefore some lessons to be learned from this part of the skills system if it does not merely become a way of mopping up displaced learners from elsewhere.

But visions are dependent on learning providers putting them into practice. And this is where the third element of the current consultation comes in. How do you best reform the system so that government meets its priorities *through* allowing providers the space to deliver on them? In this respect there are good early signals about increased flexibilities and I think providers are beginning to believe that the government really intends to let go.

This is a vision that can only be truly delivered at a local level, where 'local' means both close to customer and in a locality. 'Local' is where you can only really perceive the connective tissue between different parts of the system, the different parts of the learning ecology.

Much of this has been articulated by Baroness Sharp's Commission of Inquiry into Colleges in their Communities, which is due to report this autumn. On a recent visit to a large urban college we were fortunate to be invited into an Entry level ESOL class attended by students from over a dozen different countries. Many talked about their motivation to learn English, and so contribute more to their communities, help their families, and get a job.

Then we went upstairs to an Access to Higher Education course enjoying an interesting, if gory, lesson on the subject of serial killers. All of these students had places at university to study for vocational subjects, mainly in health, social care and education. When they were asked how many of them started in the ESOL class downstairs, six or seven hands went up.

Providers need the space to make local decisions to enable learners to progress in this way, and work with local partners such as councils, health authorities and the police to ensure learning impacts of the real lives of *people*.

That is the point that the centralisation of skills policy misses: everything is connected. The learners, the staff that support them and the place people come together to learn. That is the real vision; it's a local one, and therefore it needs to be shaped and implemented by those closest to the action.

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