

# The Future for Lifelong Learning: An Independent Commission of Inquiry



**Briefing  
February 2008**

## What is the future for lifelong learning?

- What and how do adults need to learn in our changing society?
- Who should benefit and how?
- What kinds of knowledge should we value?
- How should support for learning be organised and who should pay for what?

These are just some of the challenges that the **Independent Commission of Inquiry for Lifelong Learning**, chaired by Professor Sir David Watson, has set itself. The Inquiry is the most wide ranging and potentially far reaching review of its kind since the Adult Education Committee, established to advise the Ministry of Reconstruction at the end of the First World War, secured an emphasis on the social purpose of adult education in developing a notion of responsible citizenship.

Its ambitious aim is to make recommendations for 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 wellbeing, and environmental sustainability in the United Kingdom.

John Denham has welcomed the Inquiry, speaking in The Guardian last September, he said, 'I think there's a very good debate to be had about how we continue to ensure that we get as many people as possible with the ability to enjoy that sort of learning - learning very often for its own sake but which brings a lot of personal and social benefits.'

Speaking on his appointment as Director of the Inquiry, in TES FE Focus in December, Tom Schuller said 'We want a broad vision to come out of this review – one that doesn't represent sectoral interests – that is exciting and that will have some new ideas. It will link lifelong learning with other areas such as health, as well as the economy etc. We want to avoid the simplistic notion that you drive up skills and economic performance just falls into place. We need to look at how skills are used as well as acquired.'

He continued, 'This Inquiry is a huge and unique opportunity to make a difference to how people of all ages have access to learning. My experience in an international context at OECD shows me a major paradox. All countries are aware of the challenge to our education systems by demographic, social and economic change, but very few are really committed to lifelong learning to meet these challenges at a strategic level. We need a radical, practical and imaginative rethink of the best ways of enabling adults to learn, and of giving the biggest bang for the educational buck'.

## Top Propositions

The commissioners are concerned to ensure the first phase of the Inquiry's work is genuinely exploratory, consultative and wide ranging, and to resist reaching for premature conclusions. They are, however, looking for new and exciting ideas about the future for lifelong learning. So, why not let us have your top three propositions for lifelong learning? Please send them to [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk)

## The Commissioners' Approach

The Inquiry is being overseen by a group of eleven commissioners (see box below). They are approaching their task in two broad sweeps. The focus in the first nine months, up to May this year, is on consulting widely, gathering evidence and listening to a wide a range of perspectives as possible. In the second half of the Inquiry, the commissioners will attempt to formulate, test and refine elements of a potential national strategy for lifelong learning.

### The Commissioners

**Professor Sir David Watson**, Professor of Higher Education Management, Institute of Education, University of London (Chair of the Commission)

**John Field**, Director, Division of Academic Innovation and Continuing Education, University of Stirling

**Bob Fryer**, Chief Learning Advisor, Department of Health

**Leisha Fullick**, Pro-Director (London), Institute of Education, University of London

**Helen Gilchrist**, Educational Consultant working in the FE sector

**Clare Hannah**, Learning and Development Director, First Bus Group

**Murziline Parchment**, Director of Major Projects and Service Delivery, Mayor's Office, Greater London Authority

**Teresa Rees**, Pro-Vice Chancellor for staff and students at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

**David Sherlock**, former Chief Inspector of the Adult Learning Inspectorate

**Nick Stuart**, Chair, NIACE Company Board

**Tom Wilson**, Head of Organisation and Services, TUC

The focus for phase one of the Inquiry is on a range of themes and their implications for adult learning. To date attention has focused on workplace learning and demography.

### The Inquiry Themes

**Prosperity, Employment & Work**

**Demography & Social Structure**

**Well Being & Happiness**

**Migration & Communities**

**Technological Change**

**Poverty Reduction**

**Citizenship & Belonging**

**Crime & Social Exclusion**

**The roles of Public, Private and Voluntary Sectors**

**Environmental Sustainability**

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## Workplace Learning

Discussions on workplace learning have been wide ranging, exploring what the priorities for skills policy should be, what makes workplace learning effective, motivations and incentives for employers and employees to learn, and the role and value of qualifications at different stages of people's lives.

An expert seminar heard from the CBI's Deputy Director John Cridland; Tom Wilson, Head of Organisation and Services Department from the TUC; Sean Taggart, Managing Director of Albatross Travel Group; Lorna Unwin, Professor of Vocational Education at the Institute of Education; Mike Campbell, Development Director at the SSDA; Ewart Keep, Deputy Director of the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance; Michael Davis, Managing Director of the Centre for Enterprise; and Alan Felstead, Research Professor at University of Cardiff .

### ***Priorities for Skills Policy: 'Sophisticating Leitch'***

John Cridland argued that the 'adult learning market is a very complex and multi-faceted market. As such it requires and needs, if any progress is to be made, a sophisticated analysis with market segmentation.' He supported Leitch's analysis of the importance of skills to future economic success, given the very real impacts of globalisation on UK workers, jobs and employers. But agreed with the need to develop a structured sensitivity to skills policy to enable the complex realities of local, regional, sectoral, occupational, gender, ethnic and class-based differences to be addressed in flexible ways.

Level 3 training was, he said, an 'economically rational investment' for employers, but he re-confirmed the CBI's concerns about basic skills. From an employer's perspective, he argued, it could make sense to employ migrant workers where their skills levels exceed those of UK workers. But he questioned whether it was right for the UK that people with basic skills needs could miss out on jobs? He called

for an acknowledgement of Level 2 as a social, rather than an economic policy issue, and for the government to be clearer about the distinction between the two.

### ***'Right-sizing the contribution of skills to economic prosperity'***

Ewart Keep urged the Inquiry to be modest in its claims for lifelong learning. Current skills policy, he pointed out, has a set of ambitious aims: to reduce poverty and income inequality, increase inter-generational and social mobility, get workers into better jobs, provide greater employability, provide world-class qualification stocks, boost productivity and produce a step change in employers' demand for skills. Is all this really possible from, for example, an NVQ Level 2 in Customer Care, he asked?

He argued structural forces have a greater impact on many of the goals of skills policy, for example, 22% of all UK workers and 33% of all female workers are in low paid jobs – and those jobs are not vanishing. Those interested in income inequality might argue that the real problem is not skills, but the 22% of low paid jobs in the economy. Low pay cannot be cured by upskilling. On the other hand, Personnel managers could argue the problem is really poor quality jobs. Upskilling will not tackle this, but better personnel management, work organization and job design might.

In a related point, Michael Davis queried whether employers demand for skills is really as great as our 'collective aspiration for skills' set out in the ambitious qualification targets proposed by Leitch. He called for the Inquiry to pay much more attention to demand for learning (from both employers and employees), including what interventions and incentives would best encourage it.

If labour market models are influenced more by the structure of economy and society than by learning and skills interventions, a key issue for the Inquiry will be to understand the implications for motivation and progression, and the complex relationship between learning and economic benefits. And Tom Wilson from the TUC called for the Inquiry to consider

proposing a regulatory dimension to the new Sector Skills Agreements to drive up employer investment in training and a statutory right to request paid time off to train for adult employees without a Level 2 qualification.

### ***The Place of Qualifications***

John Cridland took issue with Leitch on qualifications. 'CBI members do not wake up in the middle of the night worrying about qualifications' he said. They are concerned about profitability, performance and shareholder value. To achieve that they are heavily concerned about productivity and skills investment. 'If qualifications fit the bill then employers will use them; if they don't they won't. And that's especially true at Level 2.'

In contrast, employees or people seeking work often value the opportunity to have their learning accredited, with qualifications often seen as being extremely valuable in recognizing competence and securing progression. A key challenge for the Inquiry is to better understand the relationship between qualifications and progression into and within the workplace and to secure appropriate progression pathways.

### ***Linking learning and work organisation***

Sean Taggart from Albatross Travel Group talked about his aim to 'make training and development as integral to his business as IT'. For him, it is 'not about systems, but culture'. They don't try to measure everything, but the company's investment in learning and development is aimed at improving the success of the business, success which Sean believes is due in large part to Albatross' support for its employees.

The importance of developing workplaces as positive places for learning where people are encouraged to learn and pass on learning to colleagues has been a key finding from Lorna Unwin's research. Where organizational learning cultures have developed learning is often tacit and experiential, informal rather than structured, borne of social interaction and embedded in effective working practices and

job organization. There are key challenges for the Inquiry to consider what an enabling pedagogy for workplace learning would look like, to understand the relationship between workplace learning and work organization, and to examine the interplay between informal learning and more structured opportunities and the implications for the balance of public investment.

### ***Next Steps on Workplace Learning***

As a result of discussions to date, the commissioners have identified five areas for further investigation:

- If labour market models are influenced more by the structure of the economy and society than by learning and skills interventions, what are the implications for motivation and progression? How do we understand the complex relationship between skills levels and wages?
- Does 'hourglass' or 'inverted pyramid' best describe the future shape of the UK labour market? How does this differ in relation to gender, age, ethnicity, class, sector and occupation?
- What is the demand for learning from employers and employees? How can it be measured, encouraged and supported?
- What is the role of different types of qualifications and levels of qualifications at different stages of the lifecourse, and what is their value to individuals and employers?
- What is the evidence of the economic and social benefits of investing in basic skills, level 2 or level 3 qualifications, in different vocational / occupational areas?

A paper summarizing the Inquiry's discussions so far on workplace learning is available at [www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk). Further thoughts, comments and reflections on the issues it raises and any gaps are welcomed. Please send comments to Jenny Williams at [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk)

## Demography and Social Structure

'The Commission is not trying to fight the last war' was David Watson's opening comment at the Inquiry's Demography and Social Structure seminar in December. 'It will be important for the Inquiry to understand changing social structures and demography to inform its consideration of future lifelong learning needs' he added.

Discussions on demography have so far centred on a paper on the patterns and issues around demography by Stephen McNair, Director for the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce. The paper is available on the Inquiry website at

[www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk) .

Contributions from a range of speakers at the expert seminar covered perspectives on young adults, mid-life, the retirement transition, after employment, the fourth age, families and gender.

### ***Changing employment patterns***

Chris Humphries, Chief Executive of the UK Skills and Employment Commission drew attention to the growing trend for 'deferred adulthood' - the pattern for young people to defer entry to 'serious career minded jobs' until their mid-late 20s. Combined with a 10% drop in the youth cohort between 2010 and 2020 he foresaw challenges for organisations looking to recruit young people and the need for a major culture change amongst employers.

Equally, Humphries called for more support for older workers. The statistics show that as intent to learn grows with age, actual learning declines. Employer practices do not, on the whole, reflect what employers say about their support for older workers; their 'willingness to support flexible working for older workers is not proportionate to demand'. He called for a campaign to help 'sell the benefits of older workers'.

To reach the 80% employment rate, he argued, we will need to connect with new

groups of adults, with a 'learning offer that is fundamentally different to anything we have been making before' and yet there is 'no strategic approach' organisationally or in funding terms. Jobcentre Plus only works with the unemployed, not the wider economically active who have significantly greater skills needs, as evidenced by the Labour Force Survey. 'There is no offer that creates a funnel to draw adults into learning in a supportive and productive way to enable them to take the first faltering steps towards learning confidence that are so important if they are to develop their confidence and begin learning journeys that will impact on their opportunities for meaningful and productive work and social contributions.'

### ***Mid Career – the importance of 'life-wide' learning***

Stephen McNair highlighted the changing experience for people in mid career – traditionally a time of stability. However, it is now the period when divorce is most likely with its attendant changes to family patterns and job or financial circumstances. Those in this mid-career phase will increasingly be caring not only for children but, as life expectancy increases, for older relatives as well. This bears particularly heavily on women, who continue to be the principal carers. Demographic change to 2020 will see a large increase in the working population aged 45–65, but a large gap in the mid career age range – 30-50, the age at which people traditionally take on managerial and leadership roles. This could either mean that less management will be done in future, or that it will be done by people who are older or younger than we are accustomed to, or by people from 'non-traditional' managerial groups – women, migrants and ethnic minorities.

The implications for 'life-wide' learning in the 'mid-career' phase, including family and intergenerational learning will be significant. A key challenge for the Inquiry will be to consider the interplay between children and families, labour market, health and fiscal policies and the contribution of learning to each.

### **Active Retirement**

In comparison with other OECD countries, the UK's progression towards an ageing population has happened earlier, so in theory we have experienced a gentler pathway to our new demographic patterns. However, as rising life expectancy has not been accompanied by a proportionate rise in retirement ages, the phase of life after paid employment has, for most people, extended significantly. This raises issues for individuals about how to maintain (or sometimes create) social networks, how to find constructive activity and how to make sense of one's life and purpose, which have implications for the nature of future informal adult learning.

### **Dependency**

The most striking feature of demographic change is probably the extension of healthy old age. Although a degree of dependency in later life is unavoidable for most, a large proportion of people are still relatively independent into their 80s. Between the ages of 75 and 84 only one person in 20 is in residential care and even after 84 the proportion is only one in 5. According to Tom Schuller, health expenditure is continuing to rise faster than GDP growth, and half the expenditure on an individual's health care over their lifetime is incurred in the last 12 months. A key challenge for the Inquiry will be to demonstrate how lifelong learning can help to contain the costs of health care, not just in later years, but throughout life.

As demographic patterns change and we experience shifts in social structures, levels of uncertainty and risk in both private and public life appear to be increasing. Tom Schuller challenged the Inquiry to think about the implications of these changes for lifelong learning and the role it might play in developing personal, social, cultural and identity capital to help people take control over their lives. Or perhaps we need a new concept of the 3Rs: 'resilience, resourcefulness, and resolve'.

### **Next Steps on Demography and Social Structure**

The commissioners are keen to focus further consideration of demography and social structure on the implications for the future of lifelong learning, in particular:

- The challenge of developing a strategic framework for lifelong learning that responds to the growing heterogeneity of experience and needs at different points in the lifecourse: coping with the similarities and dissimilarities within and between ages/stages. Is a common framework feasible, and how far is 'personalisation' of learning possible and desirable?
- The real and major danger of substantially growing polarization, emerging early and growing throughout the lifecourse. Does learning actually accentuate this, and where are the most effective points where learning can make a positive impact?
- The failure of government policies and organizations to take seriously the ageing issue, in relation both to labour market and to individual needs. Is this a marketing job, and how can awareness/perceptions be changed?
- The need for a fresh set of concepts and tools to address the issues, eg multiple 'capitals', a new set of 3Rs, risk management. Are these available?
- Learning approaches: what are the implications for learning (environments)?

Further thoughts, comments and reflections on the issues raised here and in Stephen McNair's paper are invited. Please send comments to Stephen McNair at [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk)

## Coming up ...

During early Spring, the focus of the Inquiry will be on wellbeing and happiness, and migration and communities. And in March and April the Inquiry's attention will turn to technology, poverty reduction, citizenship. Calls for evidence will be published on the Inquiry website.

Each of the calls for evidence will be focused around 3 key questions:

- What does the evidence tell us about the impact of lifelong learning on each theme?
- What are the gaps in evidence in relation to each theme?
- What key messages for the Inquiry should we extract?

## Public Investment In Adult Learning

In addition to the on-going research on the eight themes for the Inquiry, research has also been commissioned on public investment in adult learning. In order to develop an overall coherent and inclusive framework for lifelong learning, the Inquiry wishes to develop an overview of public expenditure on adult learning to be able to argue for a cross-governmental approach to securing lifelong learning. Nigel Brown Associates have been commissioned to research public expenditure on adult learning including investment by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and their equivalent departments in the devolved administrations; employer funded training of employees in public sector organisations; and activities within the budgets of departments other than DIUS (and equivalents in the devolved administrations) the sole or main objective of which is education.

## International Comparisons

The Inquiry is seeking to learn from UK-wide and international experience of lifelong learning systems. Comparisons between approaches in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be the focus of an expert seminar to be held in Cardiff in April. Papers have also been invited from colleagues in Denmark, South Africa and Slovenia to inform commissioners' consideration of what a UK strategic framework for lifelong learning should include.

## Recent Policy Developments

In parallel with the Inquiry, government policy is moving on. Since last November DIUS has published 'Adult Learning and Skills: Investing in the First Steps', and consultations on ESOL and Community Cohesion, and Informal Adult Learning. With DWP it launched 'Opportunity, Employment and Progression: Making Skills Work', and the LSC has published 'Train to Gain: A Plan for Growth'. Through deliberative public debate, the Inquiry will seek to inform to the on-going development and formation of policy, but will continue to focus how it can influence the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review with a new vision and longer-term framework for lifelong learning. Please let us know what things you think we should be taking account of as the Inquiry's work progresses.

## Further Information

[www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk)

The Inquiry website is regularly updated to reflect latest developments. On the website you will find:

- Background information about the Inquiry and the Prospectus
- Descriptions of the key themes and details of the calls for evidence and conferences
- Evidence submitted, draft and published papers
- Programmes and papers from events, including the notes of the Commissioners' meetings.

If you would like to receive future briefings on the progress of the Inquiry, please log onto the website and register your contact details. Alternatively, complete the attached form and we'll email briefings to you.

### NIACE Inquiry Team

The Inquiry is supported by a NIACE Team involving:

- Fiona Aldridge, Development Officer (Research)
- Stephen McNair, Director, Centre for Research into the Older Workforce
- Sue Meyer, Director for Programmes and Policy
- Helen Plant, Senior Research Officer
- Tom Schuller, Director for the Inquiry
- Alan Tuckett, Director
- Jenny Williams, Regional Development Officer (South East)

Please contact the team at [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk)

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