

**Lifelong, life-wide learning:
A Commission of Inquiry into an adult learning strategy for
economic success, social justice and fulfilment**

***Cover Paper for the first Commission Meeting
September 2007***

**A summary of the issues raised in NIACE
policy responses in the last decade**

1. This paper is a summary of NIACE policy responses to proposals made by Government and its agencies in the last decade.
2. A full list of responses is available on the NIACE website at <http://www.niace.org.uk/Organisation/advocacy/Default.htm>
3. More detailed policy work undertaken by NIACE is covered in policy papers and research reports which should be reflected in the literature reviews the Commission will be receiving.

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1. Introduction

1.1 NIACE has published over 180 policy response documents in the last decade. At their heart is a challenge to the learning divide which, despite a raft of policy interventions has been stubbornly persistent in the last ten years. NIACE represents the interests of all adult learners and its policy responses reflect a concern to secure 'more' opportunities for adult learners and 'better' quality provision across the board. However, it is particularly concerned to advance the interests of those who have benefited least from education and training and who are disadvantaged in society. To this end, policy responses have also advocated improved opportunities for 'different' learners, seeking to challenge the extent to which social class, age, prior educational experience, current labour market participation, and access to the internet remain powerful predictors of participation in education and training – both in work and wider society.

1.2 In a decade that has seen an increasing focus on securing 'economically valuable skills' through an employer 'demand-led' system, NIACE has continued to place the needs of learners at the centre of its policy responses. 'Motivation as curriculum' for adult learners has been a recurring theme; in response to the first Skills Strategy in 2003 NIACE's message was clear:

'The Skills Strategy is not simply about productivity and competitiveness. It is also about people.'

1.3 Whilst there has been considerable policy attention on skills and further education in the last ten years, the sector and vocational learning have continued to be undervalued by both policy makers and the public. NIACE does not represent the interest of any specific group of providers, but it has sought to promote the role of further education colleges, universities, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector as partners in a shared endeavour to advance opportunities for adults to learn for personal fulfilment, economic success and a range of wider social purposes.

1.4 This paper aims to outline some of the key issues from NIACE's policy responses in the last decade. Inevitably it is selective, and is based on a selection of responses across the decade, from The Learning Age (1997) to the Leitch Review of Skills (2006 and 2007). It focuses on the broad themes that have recurred in response to policy and funding proposals, rather than on the specific detail of, for example, inspection, qualifications reform, or tutor training.

1.5 One of the features of NIACE's responses has been the way they have articulated potential linkages between practice and policy and the interconnectedness between themes. So although the issues outlined in this paper are presented under the following headings, they also cross refer:

- Resourcing and regulation
- Policy priorities and PSA targets
- Economic agendas, for individuals and employers
- Wider learning purposes
- Institutional and partnership environment
- Making adult learning work for learners.

2 Resourcing and regulation

2.1 NIACE has broadly supported the government's moves to strengthen skills and learning throughout life to address the twin goals of securing economic prosperity and social cohesion. However, it has consistently questioned whether the combination of resource allocation (both private and public) and legislative and regulatory frameworks in place are adequate to achieve those goals. And it has also called for an active programme to secure employers', communities' and individuals' commitment to the cultural change required to transform participation in formal and informal learning.

2.2 In terms of public funding, NIACE has argued for a re-balancing of funding between the priorities for young people and adults, largely on the basis of the changing demographic profile of the population. In 'Eight in Ten' it proposed an 85:15 split between funding targeted at national priorities and that which could be available to support locally responsive provision. It has cautioned against a funding policy designed to deliver only a narrow range of vocational skills, arguing for the multiple benefits that a broader adult learning curriculum offers to individuals, communities and employers. In the context of HE, NIACE has pressed for mode free funding, to secure equitable student support and institutional funding for part-time and full-time learners, with a longer term goal of securing consistency in the arrangements for both HE and FE learners.

2.3 NIACE believes that individuals who can afford to pay more for learning should do so, to stretch the reach of inevitably limited budgets. However the 'Big Conversation' organised by the Institute in 2006 to explore the case for more investment in adult learning and review the balance to be met by employers, individuals and the state showed how little has so far been done to shift public opinion to recognise the personal and communal benefits of a change in pricing for adult learning. NIACE has suggested further review of the nature of decision-making processes concerned with individuals' investment in learning and skills outside higher education and whether or not this is linked to publicly subsidised provision. NIACE has pressed for a cultural shift programme and offered to support an informed public debate on fees and to work with providers to develop strategies for increasing fee income whilst remaining accessible to under-represented groups and low income adults through a fair remissions policy. For disadvantaged groups, NIACE has continued to call for changes to the benefits system, the rescinding of the 16 hour rule which has limited job seekers'

opportunities to develop their skills for a generation, and for all adult learners, income tax relief for those paying for their own training.

- 2.4 For employers, NIACE has cited evidence from OECD studies that reveals employer investment in education and training for staff in the UK lags behind that of comparable countries. It has called for the introduction of a steadily developing regulatory framework to enable employees (particularly part time and temporary employees, those working in SMEs, and those with employers who are 'cool to training') to access learning through the workplace and has suggested a range of measures including statutory workplace learning committees, paid educational leave, and the extension of licence to practice schemes beyond the construction and care sectors. Also proposed have been tax incentives for employers to encourage their interest in training and staff development.
- 2.5 NIACE has commented on developments in equalities legislation over the last decade from the perspective of the role that education and training can play in overcoming discrimination, and has consistently called for adult learning policy to be sensitive to equality and diversity issues for all who might benefit, most recently through a response to the DfES' draft Equality Impact Assessment on the Skills Strategy. The Institute is also currently supporting the Commission for Disabled Staff in Lifelong Learning which will publish its interim report in September on the current practices in the employment of disabled people. The Commission aims to make recommendations that can positively influence culture and practice and promote career opportunities for disabled people working in the post-compulsory education sector.

3. Policy Priorities and PSA targets

- 3.1 NIACE has been impressed by the re-balancing of public provision that has been secured through setting national targets, particularly in the area of literacy, language and numeracy work. And yet, its responses are peppered with cautions about the unintended consequences of the PSA framework. While NIACE has broadly supported the intentions of government policy, resulting targets have often been interpreted as goals in their own right rather than as indicators of success in achieving the aims of a wider strategy, and have, therefore, skewed implementation. 'The devil will be in the detail' has been a frequent refrain in NIACE responses.
- 3.2 The use of qualifications as proxies for measuring skills development and acquisition has led to a qualifications driven (rather than qualifications led) system. NIACE has expressed concern about the impact this has had with funding increasingly focused on the achievement of qualifications (and therefore targets) having the effect of narrowing the adult learning offer and creating pressure on providers to focus attention on those groups likely to secure early wins in the achievement of targets thereby disenfranchising some adults for whom qualifications based provision is not a helpful or appropriate option. NIACE has also been concerned about the emphasis on full qualifications and the limits this has placed on the public funding available for adults to strengthen their skills incrementally, accumulating credit towards full qualifications.

- 3.3 NIACE has also highlighted policy tensions between different PSAs, particularly those related to skills and employment where the short-term pressure on Jobcentre Plus to place clients in low-paid, low-security jobs has been incompatible with aspirations related to skills development for *sustainable* employment. The 'double dealing dollar' effect of family learning has also been highlighted as an example of where focusing on cross-sectoral benefits can achieve outcomes and targets for both children and adults, and yet too often strategies for achieving PSAs have been pursued in isolation.
- 3.4 Despite reservations about targets, NIACE has called consistently for an adult participation target to monitor progress in widening participation and to highlight under-represented groups. Its commitment in remit but the failure of the LSC to implement it was strongly criticised. NIACE has supported the recognition within the government's Skills for Life strategy that in order to secure the target of 1,500,000 achieving the national test, 4,500,000 people would need to be engaged since the national tests (on which targets were based) could not capture the full diversity of adults' literacy, language and numeracy needs. But an adult participation target remains elusive.
- 3.5 NIACE broadly welcomed the creation of a Level 2 target, for the entitlement it offered to adult learners. However, it has continued to argue for opportunities for those with lower level skills (citing John Bynner's and Samantha Parsons' research which shows decisively that the strongest correlation between poor basic skills, poverty, and the intergenerational impact of adults' skills on their children's performance exists for people with skills below entry level 2. And it has consistently called for a level 3 skills development entitlement for *all* adults (not only those studying in priority areas to meet sectoral and regional skills needs) in support of the view expressed in the Kennedy Report view that level 3 is the 'jumping off' point for adults to have choice and mobility in the economy and for individuals to manage their own learning.

4. Economic agendas

- 4.1 NIACE's response to skills policy located in an economic context has focused on the impact of policy on groups of adults and learners who might potentially be at a disadvantage in the labour market; recognising employment as 'the most effective anti-poverty strategy'¹. A 'long list' of groups was initially identified in response to the Learning Age in 1998. Then in 2006, NIACE invited the Government to consider what the FE White Paper offered for the following eight groups:
- Part-time and temporary workers for whom time to study is a major issue 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 the Train to Gain initiative;

¹ August 2005: The Leitch Review - A NIACE response to the Treasury's Leitch review of skills needs of the UK economy over the next twenty years

- Workers aged 45+ who are too often neglected when it comes to training and development;
- Migrants (especially from EU accession countries) 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, especially 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 health problems;
- Ex-offenders;
- Adults with literacy levels at and below 'entry level 2'.

4.2 The message for both those groups in work and those outside the workplace was that the Government's targets were not sufficient or not appropriate, though there was recognition of the additional support announced for women with low skills and the provisions within the Green Paper 'Reducing Re-Offending through Skills and Employment'. A subsequent Memo to the Work and Pensions Select Committee called for a more 'nuanced' approach for each of these 8 groups. Through its recent responses, NIACE has made the following proposals:

- A 'Return to Employment' initiative to parallel the 'Entry to Employment' programme and provide a post-55 entitlement for adults wanting to retrain for the workplace and those seeking to prepare for or to enrich their retirement and experience;
- The establishment of an Overseas Qualification Recognition Centre along the lines of those in Australia and the USA;
- Strengthened provision of ESOL for women from minority ethnic and linguistic communities offered as distinct courses, and embedded in vocational studies;
- Rescinding the 16 hour rule so that unwaged adults can agree the pattern of study and work most likely to secure a real end to welfare dependence (see para 2.3);
- Further investment in the Skills for Life strategy in recognition that reaching the next cohort of adults needing to improve their literacy, language and numeracy skills will require a higher per capita expenditure than engaging the first cohort;
- The re-introduction of Individual Learning Accounts in England to give adults an opportunity to access support for their learning beyond the employer-focused Train to Gain initiative.

4.3 One proposal in the 2003 Skills Strategy provoked firm opposition from NIACE. It suggested compelling benefit claimants to have their basic skills needs assessed and, if judged to require higher basic skill levels, to be forced into mandatory training at the risk of losing benefit. Ever since pilot arrangements for such a proposal were introduced through the Social Security (Literacy etc Skills Training Pilot) Regulations 2001, NIACE has consistently argued that compulsion of individual adults who have been failed by the initial education system is not an effective educational strategy and has no place in a civilised society. Within a skills strategy that said 'voluntarism is OK' to employers, a policy that proposed

compulsion for the most economically vulnerable adults was, in NIACE's view 'simply wrong'.

- 4.4 For employers, NIACE has argued consistently for skills policy in the economic context to be employment-led, not simply employer led. The skills that individual enterprises (and the people in them) need to survive and thrive are not always the same as the longer-term needs of the economy and society as a whole. There is a need for government leadership alongside employer involvement to address market failures, and ensure there are ladders of opportunity to enable social mobility: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
- 4.5 NIACE has sounded a cautionary note in response to the significant responsibilities proposed for the new Sector Skills Councils. It has continued to raise the issue of demography in relation to the Sector Skills Development Agency's skills planning role, particularly when it became clear that the first four sector skills agreements were planning to recruit and train the entire cohort of young people with 21 other Sector Skills Councils to follow. And it has questioned the value for money of the Employer Training Pilots in light of evidence from the pilots which indicated significant deadweight.
- 4.6 It has in recent years focused significantly on the failure of educational planning and support of the economy to recognise the impact of demography, and the failure to re-balance investment when 2 in 3 of the jobs in the next ten years must be filled by adults.
- 4.7 It has also highlighted the labour market consequences of migration and their implications for adult learning, informed by a year long Inquiry on English for Speakers of Other Languages, established by the Institute, which reported in October 2006. The Committee of Inquiry's report 'More than a language' identified 39 recommendations related to developing coherent ESOL policy across government, social inclusion, ESOL and work, quality, teacher training, funding and entitlements. 23 of those recommendations were accepted, though concerns remain about funding and entitlements.

5. Wider learning purposes

- 5.1 NIACE is arguably best known for its promotion of learning for personal fulfilment and quality of life and for campaigning on the role learning can play in fostering citizenship, respecting and celebrating cultural diversity, and helping to make ours a civilised society.
- 5.2 NIACE has consistently called for greater clarity amongst policy makers, providers and the public about the purposes for which skills are developed and the motivations for people to learn and a recognition in both policy and practice that adults lead complex lives and play multiple roles. As Helena Kennedy noted in 'Learning Works' (1997), 'learning for work and learning for life are inseparable', but in NIACE's view 'this message has been echoed in policy rhetoric but distorted by the actions of agencies charged with the allocation of public funds'. In response to the Leitch interim report NIACE argued that 'a review of skills in the UK should acknowledge that what is good for consumers, producers and investors may not be so good for the same people in their roles as

parents, spouses and citizens. Skills are necessary and valuable for both economic and non-economic reasons’.

- 5.3 In 2003, NIACE welcomed the commitment within the first Skills Strategy to safeguard ‘public support of learning for civic, social and cultural gain and personal fulfilment’, together with the explicit confirmation that ‘pensioners’ learning needs were included. In supporting the implementation of this commitment, NIACE has continued to pursue the principles of its approach to fees, ie that those who can afford to pay should do so, and that there should be appropriate remissions arrangements for under represented groups and those on low incomes combined with a flexible ‘mixed economy’ approach to resourcing provision to enable wide access to a broad adult learning curriculum. However, it has expressed continuing concern at the more recent loss of adult learning opportunities, with a million places in publicly-supported provision lost in a single year, including more than 50% of all LSC-funded work with people over 60.
- 5.4 NIACE has consistently expressed concern about the narrowing of the adult learning curriculum and in response has sought to promote and encourage provision in a range of curriculum areas ‘at risk’ and / or overlooked as priorities, including modern foreign languages, science, maths, civic literacy, parenting, financial literacy and entrepreneurship.
- 5.5 NIACE has drawn heavily on the evidence from the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre to argue for the personal and social benefits of learning, particularly those related to physical health and mental health, including for older people, and the evidence of likelihood of engagement in civic activities that tends to result from engagement in learning. This evidence has informed NIACE’s campaign to sustain the safeguard for ‘personal and community development learning’ but has also illustrated the ‘double dealing dollar’ effect of adult learning more generally. NIACE has emphasised the important role that family learning can play in supporting adults’ learning as well as the five goals of the ‘Every Child Matters’ framework. It has also highlighted the importance of intergenerational learning more broadly, involving grandparents, other kin and friendship networks as an important dimension of promoting learning communities where the benefits of learning together can raise collective aspirations and foster a sense of community cohesion, as well as addressing, through community-focused approaches, the challenge of worklessness.
- 5.6 In response to the DfES/LSC consultation document on a ‘Demand-Led System’ in April 2007 and following consultation with members and stakeholders NIACE called for the extension of the safeguard to cover not only learning for personal and community development (from which there is no explicit expectation of progression) but also first steps, progression focused learning to support the development of skills for employability for those looking to enter or re-enter the workplace and secure broad-ranging opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. It also urged that the original safeguard be a reality in light of the 30% loss of provision for learning for personal development over the past 2 years in spite of supposed ‘guarantees’ for this work.

6. Institutional / Partnership Environment

- 6.1 NIACE does not represent the interests of any specific group of providers, but does, nevertheless, comment on the implications of adult learning policy for those who work with adult learners, as well as for adult learners themselves.
- 6.2 In concert with Andrew Foster's review of the role of further education colleges, in 2004 NIACE established an Independent Committee of Enquiry to review the state of adult learning in colleges of further education in England. The outcome of that Enquiry, 'Eight in Ten', informed NIACE's response to the Foster review which supported the recommendation that further education colleges should focus their mission on employability and economically valuable skills but emphasised that 'the skills agenda cannot be achieved without recognising that colleges are also an engine of social justice and mobility'. NIACE has consistently called for colleges to be seen as partners - civic institutions firmly embedded within the communities they serve, rather than simply contractors for the delivery of education and training. In 'Eight in Ten' it recommended a discretionary element (15%) in the core funding of colleges to enable them to respond to locally-determined needs(see para 2.2) as well as meeting centrally-determined priorities. It has supported calls for stability and an end to excessive regulation of the FE sector.
- 6.3 NIACE has been disappointed in the coverage given to the role of local government in adult learning policy. In response to the first Skills Strategy in 2003 NIACE argued that it is 'in this arena [local government] that all aspects of the social and economic welfare of local communities coalesce'. Local government has a critical role in local economic development and neighbourhood renewal and has knowledge of the particular issues facing both individuals and employers within their communities, whether rural or urban. Again, NIACE has called for recognition of the significance of local authorities as active partners in adult learning, not just in relation to the provision that authorities themselves contract or deliver but in terms of their community leadership role in securing well-being including through local strategic partnerships.
- 6.4 Equally, NIACE has argued for the 'vital and imaginative role' voluntary and community organisations play in meeting the learning aspirations of a diverse population and supporting them in exercising their rights and duties as citizens in an informed way. The role of the voluntary and community sector in inter-agency collaboration is also emphasised by NIACE, for example in relation to meeting the complex needs of adults with learning difficulties and older people. The importance of securing 'equal voice' for voluntary and community sector participants in partnerships with public bodies is stressed in NIACE's responses.
- 6.5 The need to 'sort out the practicalities of partnership' at all levels has underpinned many of NIACE's responses. From inter- and intra-departmental co-operation within Government itself to join up policy, to grass roots partnerships that enable provision in communities to be dovetailed so that learners of every age can be offered opportunities of all kinds, the challenge of partnership working has been a recurring theme.

- 6.6 In terms of joined up policy, NIACE has commented on the need for articulation between proposals for Skills and those for Higher Education reform; the need for resolution of the competing and conflicting policy goals between DWP and DfES (now DIUS) (see para 3.3); and the importance of aligning the work of DCLG, DCMS and DEFRA with skills policy.

7. Making adult learning work for learners

- 7.1 NIACE's policy responses are informed by research into and experience of what works for adult learners. Responses are, therefore, peppered with references to what could be described as key features of a broad and accessible adult learning system, including:

- The importance of developing the 'meta skill' of learning to learn
- The need for wide range of starting points for learners
- The need for clear and appropriate first steps and learning pathways and embedded guidance
- Learning brokers and barefoot guidance workers in communities and workplace, with premium funding for outreach work
- ICT facilities and e-learning materials for community based adult learning
- A flexible credit framework reflecting adults' episodic, part time learning
- The importance of employability / soft skills for those not in workplace
- Staff development of FT and PT staff working in post-school education and training
- Recurrent funding rather than short-term initiative funding

- 7.2 NIACE has also made six responses on the role of broadcasting and media literacy in promoting adult learning. It has called for stronger linkages with broadcasters and DCMS to help reach places and people that other educators do not reach, and has campaigned for there to be a statutory obligation on all terrestrial broadcasters to include promotional and educational programming on mainstream mass audience channels with a curriculum range designed to stimulate and sustain engagement with Britain's culturally diverse past and present.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 This overview of NIACE's policy responses reveals a high level of consistency in the core policy messages from the last decade. A detailed reading of just a small number of the 188 responses, however, shows how those messages have been nuanced at different times in response to the prevailing policy discourse and the impact of policies on learners. Influencing policy is an art not a science, and the 'how', 'when' and 'who' require as much attention as the 'what' and 'why'.
- 8.2 NIACE's responses seek to balance (a) pragmatic proposals for achievable change, with (b) suggestions to counter the perverse consequences of policy, and (c) calls for, and reminders about the possibility of, more fundamental change – such as articulating student finance coherently with the benefits system, and exploring the potential for a tertiary system of post-16 education and

training. A more in-depth study and critical analysis of the fundamental principles that have underpinned NIACE's policy responses might help to inform the Commission's consideration of key features of a forward looking authoritative strategic framework for adult learning.

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NIACE responses used in the preparation of this paper

August 2007: Skills Strategy: Draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)
NIACE response to the DfES consultation

April 2007: Delivering world-class skills in a Demand Led System
A final NIACE response to the DfES/LSC consultation paper

January 2007: Memorandum from NIACE to the Education and Skills Select Committee
Inquiry into Post-16 Skills Training

December 2006: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills
A NIACE response to the Leitch Review of Skills

October 2006: 'More than a language...'
Final report of the NIACE Committee of Inquiry on English for Speakers of Other
Languages

September 2006: Memorandum to the Work and Pensions Select Committee from
NIACE

March 2006: One step forward, two steps missed?
An initial NIACE response to the Further Education White Paper 'Raising Skills,
Improving Life Chances' (Cm 6768)

November 2005: Realising the Potential
A NIACE comment on Sir Andrew Foster's review of the future role of FE colleges

2005: 'Eight in Ten: Adult Learners in Further Education'
The Report of the Independent Committee of Enquiry invited by NIACE to review the
state of adult learning in colleges of further education in England

August 2005: The Leitch Review
A NIACE response to the Treasury's Leitch review of skills needs of the UK economy
over the next twenty years

March 2005: Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work
An immediate response to the White Paper published on 22 March 2005

January 2005: BBC Charter Review: Promoting the interests of prospective and existing
adult learners
A briefing note from NIACE

July 2004: Literacy and Social Inclusion: the policy challenge
A NIACE response to a discussion paper by the National Literacy Trust supported by the
Basic Skills Agency

April 2004: The HE Bill House of Lords: Second Reading
A NIACE briefing

April 2004: The HE Bill House of Commons Stage: Concerns Remain

A NIACE briefing

March 2004: Lifelong Learning and the Spending Review
A NIACE response

October 2003: 21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential
A final NIACE response to the Government's Skills Strategy White Paper.

July 2003: Mental Health and Social Exclusion: Social Exclusion Unit Consultation Document
A commentary and response from NIACE

July 1999: Learning to Succeed
A NIACE response to the White Paper

June 1999: Learning Works (The Kennedy Report)
A NIACE response

July 1998: The Learning Age
NIACE's official response to the DfEE's Green Paper