

Money, money, money

Mapping spending on lifelong learning – one of the key tasks of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning – is proving highly problematic, writes Inquiry director **TOM SCHULLER**

One of the major strands of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning is a series of papers aiming to map out just how much is spent on lifelong learning. We want to gather together, in some kind of common frame, the figures which would tell us how much the state, organisations (public, private and third sector) and individuals are actually investing in lifelong learning. This is proving extraordinarily problematic, for a number of reasons.

First, a chestnut which may or may not be old for *Adults Learning* readers: who counts as an adult? The starting point varies according to which sector or agency is involved. It could be 18, 19, 21, 35, 25 – or probably a number of others in between. Simply comparing sectors is, therefore, likely to be quite misleading.

But it's not just a data question. Since the main point of gathering all this data is to be able to argue for a better balance in overall education and training expenditure – not leaving adults to the end – where the dividing line is drawn affects the picture dramatically. Almost all full-time undergraduates have turned 18, and are, therefore, adult on the normal definition. If we include spending on teaching them, this makes it appear that literally billions are spent annually on the education of adults. If we reported it in this form without comment, the public would quite reasonably get the wrong end of the stick, and politicians could point to their extraordinary largesse.

Those of us who have argued for decades against a 'front-loaded' system would be very reluctant to accept this. Young undergraduates going more or less straight to university are completing their initial education, not taking part in adult education. On the other hand, it is difficult to justify treating them as 'non-adults'; and if we abandon the most obvious (legal) definition it is difficult, in a different sense, to match up 'adult' in the formal education

sector with categories in training and elsewhere.

We want in the Inquiry to argue very strongly for a better-balanced system of education and training, and this means getting these figures right, or as near right as we can. I am coming round to the view that we shall need to move away from contrasting 'initial' and 'continuing' education, with adults inhabiting the latter, and focus attention more on the balance within post-school funding. The contrast then will be between the public and private resources devoted to different groups of 'adults' – including undergraduates. But if that is the way we go, getting this set of categories across will be a hazardous exercise.

New vocabulary

All of this adds fuel to the argument that we need a new vocabulary to talk about adult and lifelong learning. This is not about slaughtering acronyms or straining the alphabet soup. Many *Adults Learning* readers will be familiar with puzzled looks from people not in the field if you say you are involved in lifelong learning. We do need language which is accessible to all – and agreed across the boundary lines which divide one part of the system from another. Any thoughts on this, anyone?

To return to the money. Our work on public spending on lifelong learning covers not only the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Learning and Skills Council and the Department for Children, Schools and Families – the 'education' departments. Health and Defence are very major spenders, at least on their own staff (we distinguish between spending on educational provision for citizens, and spending on staff), and other departments also invest in their staff. If all of this spending is taken into account, public employers appear to spend significantly more than they are given credit for. That's all well and good; but having taken the

investigation this far we now have to go back and look again at the figures for private employers. Their spend on training is currently estimated at around £38 billion, but the basis for this is not very secure, and we need a better handle on what is actually counted.

We are also aiming to get an idea of what individuals spend. You can imagine that definitional problems abound here too. A household head reports how much they think they have spent on learning, but does this include schoolbooks for the children? The shopping trolley has a few video games in it, plus some nature documentaries and a DIY guide – what gets counted? And so on. This is not a plea for sympathy over the headaches we face, but it is a major challenge for the Inquiry to show how a better job might be done on pulling all these items together.

Money has a proverbially intimate relationship with time, and we would like also to build a picture of the amount of time people spend on learning. Is it the busy people who devote time, and how is it distributed? These are fascinating sociological questions as well as serious ones for educational policy.

This takes me to the notion of entitlement or right to learn, since that would imply either financial support or time off to learn (or both). The Inquiry held a seminar in Northern Ireland, and this focused strongly on the notion of a right to learn. We are currently working on what the best forms of this might be. We already have some examples of mechanisms and initiatives, for example, through the Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme and Individual Learning Accounts. But we are looking at the pros and cons of universal rights as opposed to ones tailored to particular groups. And is 'right' or 'entitlement' a helpful term?

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