

New Horizons: Towards a shared vision for mental health

A response to the Department of Health from
the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Introduction

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent non-governmental organisation and charity. Its corporate and individual members come from a range of places where adults learn: in universities, further education colleges, workplaces, local community settings, prisons and in their own homes via technology. The ends to which NIACE activities are directed can be summarised as being to secure more, different and better quality opportunities for adult learners in the UK and across the world. It is particularly concerned to advance the interests of those who have benefited least from their initial education and training. NIACE has a team of mental health specialist staff based in all the English regions, working with networks of practitioners interested in adult learning and mental health. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

2. NIACE warmly welcomes the Department's vision that identifies cross-government cooperation and promotion of equality as vital elements of the UK's mental health strategy. We strongly agree that an efficient mental health strategy is one based on a life-course approach that seeks to make lifestyle and well-being services available to all.

3. Addressing mental health problems requires brave policies that will deal with the complexity of adults' lives rather than simply chasing neat numerical targets. It is evident from this consultation that the Department is acutely aware that while tackling the root of mental health and well-being problems will be hugely beneficial to achieving many Government priorities it will require interventions that lie outside its own remit.

4. NIACE is familiar with the excellent cross-departmental work between the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions and on this note would encourage that the strategy pursues the same kind of relationship with the Departments for Business, Innovation and Skills and Children, Schools and Families. For although the consultation document briefly mentions the role adult learning plays in helping to improve mental health and wellbeing NIACE believes that the potential benefits that lifelong learning has to offer are still not fully appreciated.

5. The consultation identifies that those most likely to experience mental health and wellbeing problems are the socially excluded, older people, those on the lowest incomes and BME groups; the same groups that face the biggest barriers to participate in adult learning. Ironically these groups and those who experience poor mental health and wellbeing have the most to gain from participating in learning. However without purposefully linking the mental health agenda to adult learning opportunities, policies in the two Departments will continue duplicating initiatives and in many cases counteracting each other's efforts. If the strong alliance between the Department of Health and the Department of Work and Pensions were extended to the Departments for Business, Innovation and Skills and Children, Schools and Families there might be a more effective partnership working among frontline services. The demise of the Learning and Skills

Council and the establishment of the new agencies (Young People’s Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency) presents a critical opportunity to better join up public services. In time of financial constraints when the public purse has to invest smarter rather than invest more there is no better time to tackle these policy discrepancies.

Impact of adult learning on mental health and wellbeing

6. The Department’s strategy rightly identifies that tackling mental health and wellbeing problems means: giving people hope and more control over their lives, building and nurturing their resilience to cope with life’s problems and reducing social exclusion particularly among older citizens. These are not just worthy aspirations they are solutions that will save Government money and have positive knock-on effects on many of its policies.

7. NIACE’s work shows that adult learning is a particularly effective and efficient way in achieving all of the above after problems arise and before as a preventive measure. Some of the quantitative evidence of this shows that:

- taking women without qualifications to Level 2 (equivalent to a GCSE of grade A-C) would reduce the risks of depression at age 42 by 15 per cent, worth an estimated saving of up to £200 million a year in the UK¹;
- 14% of adults who took one or two leisure courses increased their sports/leisure membership between the ages of 33 and 42 compared to the predicted 9% of adults with similar characteristics who took no courses of any type² and;
- 80 per cent of older learners reported a positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas: their enjoyment of life; their self-confidence; how they felt about themselves; satisfaction with other areas of life; and their ability to cope³.

8. Furthermore the qualitative evidence we encounter on the everyday experiences of learners is most compelling:

Judith Richardson, aged 32 from Newcastle Outstanding Regional Learner of the Year Award 08

Three years ago Judith Richardson was desperately ill. She had clinical depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and agoraphobia; she could barely leave the house unless her nine-year-old son was there to support her. “I should have been supporting and caring for him,” she says.

Today things are very different, although it was not a doctor but the chance to enter adult education that gave her the strength to turn her life around.

Judith had little self-confidence and never thought of herself as a learner but enrolling in short courses such as assertiveness training and ICT started her on an amazing journey. She’s completed several adult teaching qualifications and is studying for more, has trained to be a Learn Direct facilitator and now teaches family history.

¹ Feinstein, L et al. (2008) *The Social and Personal Benefits of Learning: A summary of key research findings*, Institute of Education.

² Feinstein, L et al. (2008) *op.cit*

³ Dench, S and J Regan (2000) *Learning in Later Life: Motivation and Impact*, Research Report RR183, Department for Education and Employment.

But her most important gain from learning is not a certificate but her love of life. “If I hadn’t done these [courses] I would have probably lost my children or died,” she says. “Suicide had always been an alternative but I couldn’t let my children grieve the way I had.

“Learning means the world to me... I could never have done it without the support of the community project. I wish I could win the lottery to fund them forever because they gave me my life back and no tablet or doctor in the world could do that.”

9. The breadth of work that NIACE does in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council, and previously with the National Social Inclusion Programme (NSIP) and now the Inclusion Institute through the Mental Health Partnership Programme highlights how taking a broader cross government and agency approach produces creative and relatively inexpensive solutions to support people with mental health problems. For example, the project, *Is it for me?* used a learning and skills approach to support people with mental health problems to take up Direct Payments. By addressing individuals’ skills levels, or more often people’s confidence in their skills levels, the project enabled many with mental health problems to access Direct Payments.

10. Another example of NIACE’s work addresses those patients described in the consultation document as having “medically unexplained symptoms”. In 2000 NIACE obtained funding from the European Social Fund, the East Midlands Development Agency, Nottingham Health Action Zone and the Information, Advice and Guidance Network to establish a programme that would place learning advisors inside General Practices to prescribe learning as part of route back into positive well-being. NIACE’s research has shown consistently that adult learning is a good tool to re-motivate people with poor well-being who are beginning to struggle with mental ill health. However education is rarely uppermost in the mind of GPs when they see patients. The project, *Prescriptions for Learning*, produced very positive results. Out of the 49 people being referred to a learning advisor, 46 of them took up their appointment and 32 went on to participate in a learning activity. When individuals were asked whether getting involved with learning had made any difference to them, the overwhelmingly response was ‘yes’ and interviewees were very enthusiastic, reporting benefits to their mental health but some also reported physical benefits. Unfortunately this project was not continued when the initial funding ceased. This was because it could not be decided which department, health or education, should bear the cost of the project despite its benefits.

11. The Foresight report identified lifelong learning as one of the 5 ways to sustain positive well-being and we would strongly encourage the Department to make adult learning a more prominent mechanism to achieve its goals. Education is not a bolt on that will cost the Department more money but rather it is a facilitator that runs through all aspects of the strategy.

Smarter investment and cross-government cooperation

12. NIACE is aware that any aspirations for the new strategy have to be considered in the context of financial constraints. However we are also aware that the costs of dealing with

poor mental health and wellbeing far outstrip the investment needed, even though this might not be immediately evident.

13. We are particularly concerned that many of the community and outreach programmes described in the consultation document as best suited to produce outcomes, are at high risk of being seen as soft targets to cut public spending from, particularly if they lie outside the Department of Health's remit and are not protected under the banner of this strategy.

14. Over the last three years re-direction of policies in Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have reduced the number of adult learners by 1.4 million individuals⁴. The majority of these learners were on short and entry level programmes, the type of courses most commonly used to improve wellbeing. Furthermore the greatest loss has happened in a key group of the mental health strategy: older individuals. In three years there were 45% less people aged 60 and over participating in publicly funded learning. NIACE's own figures report that the biggest loss of adult learners has happened in those on the lowest incomes (socio-economic groups D and E), leaving the most vulnerable to mental health problems without this kind of support. The loss of learning opportunities has serious repercussions to the Department's vision to create a society where wellbeing services are available to all.

15. Even more concerning is that this shortfall in learner numbers happened during a period where investment in adult skills was increasing rapidly. The fact that the benefits brought about from these courses were not directly measurable or contributing to the skills targets meant they were seen as expendable programmes. However this loss in adult learning opportunities has direct negative effects on the Department of Health's capacity to deliver its goals. This is why NIACE would strongly advocate for the mental health strategy including greater links with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

16. Better communication between the departments should enable:

- BIS to recognise the impact of adult learning on overall well-being and mental health through the creation of an adult learning participation target which would include engagement in all kinds of learning.
- Both Departments to monitor the benefits and savings that adult learning makes to other departments' public expenditure. (This would allow for provision that falls between two categories, health and education, to be mainstreaming and become a funding priority.)
- The Department of Health to use adult learning as part of a preventative health strategy.
- Commitment to making the post-16 learning sector, an example of promoting positive mental health and well-being with a similar scheme to the NHS's pledge as a *Mindful Employer*. NIACE is already working to support this. As part of the work carried out in 2008-09 under the Mental Health Partnership Programme, the LSC developed the '*Mental Health Strategy. The Way Forward*' 2009 in which it stated an action to become a *Mindful Employer* and to encourage other learning and skills

⁴ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics>

providers and agencies to do likewise. NIACE has developed a training pack to guide learning and skills providers and agencies to support mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

- Establishing participation in learning and skills as an outcome referred to by the Department of Health's *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies* (IAPT) framework.
- The new Adult Advancement and Careers Services to recognise the power of adult learning in maintaining, lifting and re-motivating peoples' well-being.

17. NIACE is particularly well placed to support cross-government support between the two departments as its work in the field already crosses these boundaries. For example this year work undertaken by the Mental Health Partnership Programme is looking at an integrated employment, learning and skills approach. By joining up support packages available in the health and social care and employment services with those available in adult guidance services, learning and skills provision and the voluntary sector we help staff from a multiplicity of agencies to better support people with more complex mental health needs embark on a journey of getting back into employment and/or skills development. This has resulted in the delivery of better joined up services.

18. Furthermore also through the Mental Health Partnership Programme we have developed an important project called 'Back on Track 2' that is developing strong collaborative approaches between Early Intervention in Psychosis Services' and Further Education colleges to ensure that young people with early onset psychosis are enabled to remain in, or re-engage with learning and skills opportunities. Nine pilot projects around England are currently working to identify good practice and also testing out curriculum development initiatives to ensure that the particular needs of this group of young people are being met. Through the Mental Health Partnership Programme we are able to ensure that findings are linked strategically to the Learning and Skills Council and the forthcoming Young People's Learning Agency.

Conclusion

19. NIACE would welcome the opportunity to help the Department create a "cross-government multi-agency alliance" with BIS and other adult learning stakeholders. We strongly agree with the vision outlined in this strategy and believe that the holistic approach envisioned has the potential of making a big difference even during times of financial constraint.

20. We look forward to contributing further to discussions. In the first instance please contact Kathryn James, Programme Director for Learning and Health at Kathryn.james@niace.org.uk; telephone 0116 2044281.