

An initial response from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) to the *Open Public Services* White Paper (Cm 8145)

July 2011

1. The education and training of adults is a complex territory, bringing together elements of public services, market-driven activity and social movements in civil society. As a long-established charity and non-governmental organisation, the members of NIACE span local authorities, colleges and universities, social and private enterprises, voluntary bodies and unions, broadcasters and the Army. This initial reaction paper will be enriched as the different perspectives of the membership are considered and balanced in a formal response.
2. The White Paper sets out five guiding principles for modernising public services:
 - increased choice
 - decentralisation to the lowest appropriate level
 - open to a range of providers
 - fair access
 - accountability to users and taxpayers.
3. Each of these has a substantial educational dimension to it and NIACE's headline reaction is that **the paper could be strengthened considerably if it had a clear and explicit focus on the learning and skills that ordinary people and communities will need to be empowered and to contribute to the realisation of these principles.** In the absence of that, or of a means of developing it, many of the misgivings and concerns articulated, not least by the public sector workforce, are understandable and in need of answer.
4. NIACE endorses the view that "reform of public service is a key progressive cause" but asks Government to consider how far a decade of persistent tinkering with the structures and practices of public services by Whitehall and Westminster has contributed to inefficiencies as the creativity and energy of public servants gets distracted from the core task. Too often, especially in the further education sector, actual and potential students and trainees have been disempowered from acting as informed users of services by incessant, continual re-structuring. This has been likened to digging up a plant to see if the root system is growing! Instability weakens rather than strengthens local control.

5. Before embarking on a reform process, NIACE asks the Government to assess, very carefully, what evidence exists that taking a service out of the public sector will improve things for service users. The risk is that change will, instead, simply benefit a new set of providers. There is a risk too that the five principles assume an unhelpful totemic importance. An illustration of this might be adult learners for whom high-quality and locally accessible provision are of far greater significance than ‘choice’ and in the case of schools, the way that an expression of parental preference becomes interpreted as a ‘parental choice’ shows that the term is not always helpful.
6. It is hard to argue against people having more control and NIACE is open minded about the extent to which new providers might lead to more innovative and responsive services in many areas. NIACE is not at all convinced, however, that open markets will be any more effective than top-down micro-management in delivering better services without an increase in the overall quantum of resources committed to enhancing learning and skills of the adult population.
7. There are a number of things to welcome in the paper, not least the commitment (in the Foreword) that “we want to make opportunity more equal” and recognition that persistent failure to extend equal opportunity to all is a “blight” but NIACE would welcome the inclusion of the distribution of opportunities for post-compulsory education and training listed explicitly amongst the inequalities that leave “our society less free, less fair and less united”.
8. Such a recognition would be helpful because of the particular attention given to ‘informal adult and community learning in paragraph 5.3 of the paper:
 - a. **5.3 We will look at where the separation of purchasers from providers makes most sense as a means of encouraging innovation and diversity of provision.** The lessons of this commissioning approach from the past two decades and recent innovations in commissioning, for example in getting the long-term unemployed back to work, will inform our efforts. The Work Programme is devolving responsibility and transferring risk to providers, who are now paid largely by results for getting people into work and keeping them in employment. We will look at how this approach can be extended to other services. For example, that is why we are consulting on how best to commission the provision of informal adult and community learning and improve providers’ accountability to local communities. And, no matter who the commissioners are, our vision of open public services involves a clear role for the state at both the national and local levels.
9. This attention is welcome but the notion of ‘payment by results’ in the area of non-formal, often uncertificated, learning will require considerably more unpacking. It is increasingly accepted that an over-reliance on targets risks distorting policies in one way, ‘payment by results’ does so in another. What is

lost is the possibility of services, especially in education and training, being negotiated between providers and users and changing over time.

10. NIACE is disappointed that there appears to be a presumption across the rest of the document that 'education' is concerned primarily with children and young people, rather than with lifelong learning although it is acknowledged that there is an appreciation, in rhetoric at least, that "every mind uncultivated" is a "burden on society". The sentiment is understandable even if the expression of it is clumsy.
11. NIACE looks forward to a dialogue with its members, parliamentarians of all parties and other stakeholders in civil society over the coming months to ensure that the planned reform programme results in better services for adult learners. Readers wishing to join this discussion can contact alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk in the first instance.

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