

Shifting power to the learner

Decades of reform have resulted in a system of further education that treats adults like children, with limited control over the qualifications they choose to pursue. Learning accounts – operating like any other bank account, but used only to pay for learning – would shift power back to the learner and help create a genuinely demand-led system, argues **ALISON WOLF**

British governments have long been convinced, in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence, that they can predict the future. You might think they would be disabused by the financial crash, our limping economy, and the yawning gulf between the Treasury's current expectations and its confident predictions in times of plenty.

Not a bit of it. They still think they know what will happen, for years ahead, far better than the rest of us. This conviction drives the whole of the country's adult education and skills system and, in doing so, explains why governments treat both adults and employers as rather stupid children and tell them exactly what to learn, and how to train.

This needs to change. Money must follow learners, not government contracts, and so create a genuinely demand-led system.

Governmental delusions have laid further and adult education waste. They have also created an appetite for change. This is true even though professionals and institutions are exhausted by decades of interference, bureaucracy, and the endless restructuring of quangos, inspectorates and government departments.

If you look at the choices that young people in England, France, the USA, or other countries, have made in the last few decades, it is clear that they have a far better grasp of what the labour market values than governments do. They queue up for the courses and qualifications that are valuable and largely turn their backs on new initiatives created by central government departments

with theories about how education and the labour market ought to behave.

Adult workers, when asked what they would like to study, choose completely different things from the low-level NVQs that are currently foisted on them. We cannot tell what would have happened if they had been able to follow their preferences over the last 20 years, but the NVQs devised and funded by government have been of no obvious use to most of them. Meanwhile, teenage girls have been subject to repeated government campaigns urging them to go into construction, engineering, metal work. They have taken no notice, which is fortunate for them, given the declining job opportunities and soaring unemployment in these traditionally male occupations.

Sensible decisions

Many people are uneasy with the idea that adults or, more specifically, non-graduate adults can make sensible decisions for themselves. In arguing for parentalism and planning, they tend to refer to extremely 'hard cases', such as recent immigrants or families in which there is a multi-generational history of disadvantage. But there is actually no reason to suppose that even these groups cannot make decisions for themselves at least as effectively as distant government officials make decisions for them.

I propose new financial and regulatory structures which allow colleges to choose exactly what to offer, including their own awards, and do away with most existing quangos while still safeguarding quality. More

importantly, we must also give learners direct access to education subsidies through the creation of genuine learning accounts.

The current government's latest initiative is a new form of centrally planned provision relabelled as 'skills activism'. So I am not expecting ministers to endorse this tomorrow. But it is clear that support for structural reform exists not only among educators, but also in the awarding bodies and the quangocracy itself.

Learning accounts – real learning accounts – would operate just like any other bank, building society or Post Office account, but be used only to pay for learning. That could be anything from bricklaying to maths A-level, computer programming to philosophy: the learner chooses. People would pay money into them, and the government likewise.

One analogy is Gift Aid, where the government tops up our gifts to charity with additional funds. Learning top-ups would go into individuals' own accounts, at levels that varied both with individuals' circumstances, and with the size of the further education budget. When the money is actually used would be entirely a matter for the account holder – again, like any normal bank account. And with the learner in control, a far simpler system of inspection and accreditation of learning providers could also be achieved, as my new report outlines in detail.

One of the major justifications for government micro-management and planning of further education is that people do not have the information, or, indeed, the ability, to

make good choices about what they should learn. Instead, they need governments and professional advisers to design courses, place restrictions on what people can choose, and provide detailed advice on options.

Adult learners generally disagree. Although they may value advice, especially from teachers and colleges, they rarely recount good experiences from dedicated 'career services' or advisers. Two of the few large-scale pilots of adult learning vouchers compared different delivery approaches: with and without accompanying formal advice. Both found that an overwhelming majority of voucher recipients did not request advice and counselling if given the option of using it, or doing without. Moreover, making attendance at orientation and advice sessions a compulsory part of the scheme significantly reduced uptake of the vouchers.

Adults have clear ideas about what they are interested in, and about where their self-interest lies. This is generally just as true of recent immigrants with limited English language skills as it is of native-born adults. Immigrants are very clear about their language skill requirements, and about whether and how far publicly provided tuition gets them to the levels they need for labour market success (the fact that some groups are unable to access English for Speakers of Other Languages provision does not mean that they do not want it and cannot evaluate its quality.) In the case of native-born adults, the options they would like to take up, given a free choice, are often very different from those that are identified by government as of high priority and eligible for high subsidy levels.

Good choices

Given the poor record of the government's own choices in raising either young people's or adults' earnings, it is not obvious why one should assume that it is a competent judge of what people should learn. The evidence suggests the opposite, while also supporting the argument that individuals are, by and large, much better able to make good choices for themselves, and find relevant and trusted advice, than any bureaucracy can hope to be.

It is hardly surprising if governments cannot develop and update a complete range of suitable courses and qualifications for the whole post-compulsory, non-university sector of a country with a population of over 50 million (in England alone). And, indeed, they cannot. As a result, our current system is hugely expensive, sclerotic, and has failed to achieve its own narrowly defined economic objectives of raising individuals' earnings and employability, and national productivity.

On the basis of these arguments, a demand-led system would require the following infrastructure, which would address information and competition issues, and place certain constraints on where people can use further education and





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training subsidies, and for what:

1. One or more accreditation agencies, which approve institutions as competent to offer courses and qualifications (including, should they so wish, the institution's own qualifications). Such agencies would award licences for a given period of years and would also be able to respond to complaints, and intervene before the end of the licensed period, if there were good grounds for doing so. Models for such an accreditation agency include the Council for National Academic Awards, the Quality Assurance Agency, the US regional accrediting agencies, and business school accreditation agencies such as EQUIS, AMBA or FIBAA.

2. A regulatory agency that undertakes some of the current tasks allocated to Ofqual by providing formal approval to external awarding bodies. Licensed institutions would not need to have

their own awards separately accredited in this way; their institutional accreditation would subsume this process. Unlicensed institutions could only offer qualifications from awarding bodies which have been accredited by Ofqual: this process would itself include monitoring and regulation of the procedures by which awarding bodies accredited providers of their qualifications.

3. A system of easily accessible online information on institutional capacity and performance, whose accuracy is subject to audit as part of the licensing process. This might be a free-standing facility, maintained on a national basis, or a set of requirements imposed on institutions that can receive subsidised students.

The current system of further education and training increasingly revolves around detailed contracts, issued by government to providers. This is creating a non-competitive system for

FE funding, where colleges and training providers are more motivated to respond to government mandates than learners' needs. Trainers agree to 'deliver' qualifications, designed to government specifications, at the levels, in the quantities, and in the sectors the government thinks we need.

In other words, government knows what the economy of today and the future needs. Only they don't. Many of these qualifications bring no financial benefit to the people who obtain them; and the government's own surveys find an oversupply of qualifications in most of the labour market.

Central planning never works – this time is no different. Let individuals decide what learning might serve them best, now and for the future. They will do a far better job.

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Her new monograph, How to shift power to learners, on which this article draws, is published by the LSN's Centre of Innovation in Learning (<http://www.lsnlearning.org.uk/>)