



Photo: Sue Perkins

You say you want a revolution...

While the new money on offer is modest, the rhetoric of The Learning Revolution, the Government's informal adult learning White Paper, is a welcome echo of David Blunkett's preface to The Learning Age and in marked contrast to the language of the skills strategy, writes **ALAN TUCKETT**

What do you need for a revolution? In political revolutions you may need tanks to put on someone's lawn, enough insurgents to take command of the airport and the radio station, a clear break with the old order, and a line in millennial rhetoric that promises fresh dawns, gleaming new futures, and an end to the bad old ways, to energise the population into supporting the new regime.

Cultural revolutions are a bit different. You can do away with the tanks and smoking guns – usually, anyway. Style matters. As Emma Goldman put it, 'If I can't dance I don't want to join your revolution'. In place of violence you get reframing of assumptions, institutions and social practices. Rhetoric remains of key importance, though – to help people to see the world afresh. Anyone who lived through the sixties in Britain will have a sneaking nostalgia for the kind of revolution where growing your hair and playing loud music could change the cultural mores of a stuffy post-war world. It looked rather different when you tried the same things in Prague. And the cultural revolution in China may have been bathed in utopian propaganda at the time, but turned out to be an unpleasant and dangerous experience for anyone committed to learning.

John Denham's White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*, clearly aspires to the more benign type of cultural revolution. It is certainly strong on rhetoric: 'The Government recognises that informal learning can transform individual lives and boost our nation's well-being. At its best, it can bring people and communities together, challenge stereotypes and contribute to community cohesion. It can unite the generations and help people remain active and independent into old age.' If there are echoes here of David Blunkett's preface to *The Learning Age* they are entirely welcome, and in marked contrast to the grim utilitarianism of the Foster review or the strategies arising from the Leitch report.

Again, as the White Paper acknowledges, '[a] national vision for informal learning needs to be translated into action that genuinely affects people's lives.' To that end, the Government recognises the importance of the leadership it can give, the value of weaving together the initiatives of different departments of state, and the key importance of local authorities in bringing together coalitions of organisations in civil society to offer the richest mix of learning opportunities possible. The paper's great strength lies in the firm connection it makes between self-organised learning activities, in sports clubs, faith organisations and women's institutes, and more structured publicly funded education for adults. And it contains £30 million of new initiatives. A

£20 million transformation fund, like the Adult and Community Learning Fund of a decade ago, seeks to foster innovation; there is an emphatic move to open public spaces for community learning; an informal learning pledge; and a six-month festival of learning. There are to be digital mentors and community learning champions; and broadcasters and wider cultural institutions are to be engaged.

To date, *The Learning Revolution* has prompted three distinct responses. In the cultural sector, and in a number of third-sector organisations, there is great excitement – as the monolith of post-school policy is helpfully relaxed. Already, since its publication, a new Lifelong Learning Board of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council has met, determined to make the most of the new possibilities, and sharing a plethora of new ideas on how to exploit collections to enrich cultural life.

By contrast, in a letter to the *Daily Mail*, Ted Croom, a frustrated adult education student from Portsmouth, calls it 'another piece of half-baked spin'. In 2004, he argues, 'Our political masters decided ... that courses for pleasure, being non-vocational, did not lead to any nationally recognised qualification and cut the funding – forcing the majority of centres to curtail such courses. Nowadays, there is nowhere in the Portsmouth area where I can go at reasonable cost for conversational French (no, I do not want to do GCSE French).'

Learners like Ted who have lost places in taught classes feel that there was indeed a revolution – but that it was the one that ushered in the skills strategy, and ushered out their evening classes. All the journalists who phoned NIACE (well, three!) expressed similar scepticism – contrasting the scale of reductions in adult education provision in the last three years with the modest levels of new investment.

By contrast, the bulk of organisations which signed up to the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning have also signed the new pledge. Whilst they continue to press for re-balancing of post-school budgets they recognise the important signal the White Paper represents of a change in direction in Government policy. Yes, there is only modest new money, they argue, but the paper's analysis recognises the value of adult learning, and we must use it as a bridge-head for further development. There are concerns that the contribution of qualified teachers is insufficiently recognised, but the opportunities are real, and must be seized.

So, is the new direction revolutionary? Ted and his friends are sceptical; the cultural sector is inspired. But, for the bulk of providers, the changes announced are helpful incremental change, and no worse for that.

Alan Tuckett is Chief Executive of NIACE



The

There is consensus across the three main political parties that adult learning, in all its forms, matters. As the Government publishes its White Paper on informal adult learning, we ask what they think needs to be done about it

revolution's here

By working in co-operation, the Government and a multitude of partner organisations can create a new movement for informal learning, argues **John Denham**

Learning, in all its many forms, contributes to our quality of life, happiness and personal wellbeing. We know that improving our skills is one of the most powerful things we can do to help realise our career goals, and that's why total funding to support adult skills will increase from £4.6 billion in 2007-08 to £5.0 billion in 2009-10, with around three million learners a year set to benefit.

But we also know that informal adult learning, with its kaleidoscope of part-time learning for pleasure and personal development, makes an enormous contribution to people's mental and physical wellbeing. And the benefits of informal learning extend far beyond the individual. Informal learning contributes to the wellbeing of communities by building people's confidence. It develops the social 'glue' and the common interests that help different groups understand one another, eventually creating resilient networks of support and solidarity that make social inclusion and community cohesion a reality on the ground.

As we set out in our White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*, the past years have witnessed a groundswell of people and communities learning in different ways, including through the internet, broadcasting and self-organising. We want to support this movement by encouraging innovative collaborations between different sectors and different partners, old and new, to improve the offer and widen access. We want to raise the profile and take-up of learning wherever it happens, so that all adults can get the benefit of high-quality learning that combines the best of traditional delivery techniques with the opportunities offered by new developments in broadcasting and

technology.

The Learning Revolution sets out how we plan to do this. It outlines what different partners can do to support learning for its own intrinsic value – partners like government departments, national organisations, Learning and Skills Council-funded learning providers and their staff, broadcasters, public and private libraries and archives, the cultural, heritage, sporting and arts sectors, membership organisations and many more.

During our consultation, different kinds of learning organisations found common ground and developed creative partnerships as a result of the events and round-table discussions they attended. Many said that they wanted to continue exchanging ideas and working together after the consultation ended. So an important work strand in the new strategy, building on the momentum developed during the consultation, is to create widely shared commitment to informal learning through a new *Learning Revolution*

pledge, EXPO event and autumn festival of learning. The campaign and pledge are already backed by more than 65 national organisations, ranging from the City Lit, the Church of England and The National Trust to Microsoft and BUPA. These organisations and their people will be important ambassadors and advocates for informal learning and key drivers for change and innovation on the ground. We're encouraging all organisations with an interest in informal learning to sign up to the pledge at <http://www.dius.gov.uk/learningrevolution>. Could your organisation sign up?

In addition to the £210 million safeguarded for informal learning each year through to 2010-11 and government funding

of around £10 million each year for UK Online centres, we will support the kinds of fruitful collaboration and innovative development we saw during the consultation period with a new £20 million transformation fund. We want partners to be creative. Bids to the fund could be focused on opening up new spaces for learning, putting together new partnerships to deliver learning or testing new mechanisms to open up provision for specific groups of learners who currently find learning hard to access. Successful bids will demonstrate how the new partnerships and projects will address barriers to learning and, if they are successful, how they could be

“We want to raise the profile and take-up of learning wherever it happens, so that all adults can get the benefit of high-quality learning”

mainstreamed for the future.

We believe that local organisations know their communities best. We will ask local authorities to provide the leadership and infrastructure to underpin the offer, working with LSC-funded providers, third-sector organisations and other key players like libraries, schools, UK Online centres, advice services and children's centres. These organisations understand their neighbourhoods and need to be working together, with aligned funding streams, to reduce duplication and enhance effectiveness. Together, they play a critical role in developing opportunities for a diverse range of people from different social and ethnic groups.

The Learning Revolution sets out a range of proposals for improving take-up of informal learning, including:

- opening up a wide range of public and private places for learning as part of the pledge scheme;
- funding a support package for community learning champions;
- implementing proposals to increase access to learning for older people, including support for pre-retirement activity and learning in care settings;
- implementing proposals to increase access to informal learning at work, in collaboration with Unionlearn and Business in the Community;
- setting up a competition to design an online informal learning information bank and a directory of free or low-cost spaces for learning;
- commissioning an independent review of ICT Skills for Adults, chaired by Baroness Estelle Morris, to support digital inclusion at home and at work;
- working with Communities and Local Government to build on the Digital Mentors programme, giving mentors a role in helping older people and disadvantaged groups to develop the IT skills they need to access information, services and learning opportunities.

The Learning Revolution describes how, by working in co-operation, Government and a multitude of partner organisations can create a new movement for informal learning. At the start of the consultation process, many people said such co-operation would be impossible to achieve. We proved between us that it was possible. So the White Paper has sown the seeds of the movement and the Government will support as much as it can.

But it will take the continued and combined efforts of many more partners to grow these seeds into strong trees and bring about the *long-term* learning revolution that will enable every adult to discover his or her interests and fulfil them. This is the challenge before us. Together I know we can do it.

John Denham is Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills

Only when the policy matches the rhetoric will adult learning be revived, says **John Hayes**

GK Chesterton said that 'education is the soul of society as it passes from one generation to another.' It is our duty to pass on our knowledge and skills; indeed, as a nation, we should be judged by how well we perform this task. But while successive secretaries of state have played lip-service to the importance of lifelong learning, in practice there has been a shocking collapse in access to education and training. Enrolments at further education

(FE) colleges have plummeted. There are now nearly one million fewer learners in FE than when Labour came to power and community learning has suffered most, with 1.5 million places lost.

Few would have predicted such a dismal outcome a decade ago when the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, acknowledged the wider contribution education makes to society. In the preface to *The Learning Age* Green Paper, Blunkett wrote that education 'helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship'. Sadly, these fine words were not translated into effective policy.

It is with this in mind that we should assess the Government's new White Paper on adult education, *The Learning Revolution*. Once again, the content fails to live up to the grand title. There is no commitment to reverse the projected real-terms cut in spending for what is now, ironically, labelled 'Adult Safeguarded Learning' and more commonly known as community learning. In fact, figures released the same week as the White Paper show that the number of learners in adult 'safeguarded' learning actually fell below 300,000 last year.

That ministers have consistently failed to convert their words into deeds suggests they do not really understand the contribution lifelong learning makes to unlocking individual potential and building a stronger and fairer society. While the economic climate remained bright the Government failed to grasp the key role adult education plays in facilitating social justice, social cohesion and social mobility. As a result, as the economy grew, opportunity did not grow with it.

In the past, sustained periods of economic growth were accompanied by social transformation. During the long post-war boom, a whole generation took advantage of Rab Butler's landmark 1944 Education Act. Opportunity was spread more widely, because Butler knew, as he put it, that 'education is the spearhead of social reform'. But in the recent boom that has now so tragically turned to bust social divisions were often entrenched, not broken down. And, as numerous academic studies have revealed, social mobility actually declined. It is now much harder to make your way up the social ladder than it was a generation ago. And the decline in adult education is an important explanation for why this is so.

Ultimately, it is Labour's obsession with outputs rather than outcomes that resulted in the decline in adult and community learning. Funding has been withdrawn from informal learning even though it often leads to formal study and, as research shows, can have benefits for health, help reduce crime and lead to greater social cohesion. Instead, the Government has diverted funding to support a narrowly defined type of employer-based training through Train to Gain that was either already taking place or, as the Government's own research has revealed, is of no benefit to businesses' bottom-line or to the wage and promotion prospects of those trained.

It is only when policy finally matches rhetoric that adult learning will be revived. It is because Conservatives understand that education empowers individuals and the communities of which they are a part that we have made it central to our agenda for government. That is why, in our skills Green Paper, we announced plans to re-focus spending so that we could deliver an extra £100 million every year for adult education.

We are merely the custodians of the learning and craft that has accumulated through the ages and defines our civilisation. It is by ensuring that everyone has access to this knowledge that we can build a fairer, more cohesive and dynamic society.

John Hayes is Conservative Shadow Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education

Providing new spaces for learning is one thing, but it can only be one element of the successful promotion of adult learning, writes **Stephen Williams**

Whilst travelling on the London Underground, I noticed an Open University advertisement which encourages its readers to 'recession-proof your career'. This is certainly one way of characterising the opportunity that adult learning offers, particularly during this time of economic uncertainty. But, more than this, adult learning should be a means for adults of all ages and stages to broaden their horizons and challenge themselves. Here in the UK, adult learning should be a learning 'journey', whether for career advancement or simply for self-development and emotional wellbeing.

At the Liberal Democrat spring conference in March I had the privilege of bringing forward our policy paper, *Investing in Talent, Building the Economy*. The paper set out Liberal Democrat further and higher education policy, and was the outcome of a working group of which I was the Chair. I believe that our paper sets out a clear strategy to facilitate the learning 'journey' that I mentioned above. The two key principles that underpin this strategy are the creation of *a climbing frame for learning* and *a level playing field*.

A 'climbing frame' approach would consist of a credit-based framework for learning, allowing each student a choice of 'pathways' to higher-level qualifications and the opportunity at every stage to move sideways, as well as upwards. It means that at every stage there is the opportunity to mix academic and practical learning. A transition to a modular system would give each course a 'credit rating'. A number of UK universities and colleges already use such a system and similar systems have been proven to work well in the United States, Australia and Canada.

A levelling of the playing field is long overdue. It can only be right that if the state is providing free tuition up to a certain level for students on one pathway, then this should apply equally for all other routes. Likewise, where maintenance grants are available to one set of students, they should be equally available, on a *pro rata* basis, to others. Hence, full-time adult FE students must be treated in the same way as full-time HE students. We should treat part-time adult FE students in the same way as part-time HE students. And we need to expand massively the opportunities for adults to achieve Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 apprenticeships.

Overall, the adult education funding system needs to be designed in such a way that progression of educational attainment is made possible through targeted financing. So the Liberal Democrats would fully fund an individual's first Level 3 regardless of their age, and their first degree, whether studied for part-time or full-time. Additionally, continuing education, including short courses (whether or not for certification), would receive additional funding.

This set-up would create an environment for adult learning that was conducive to both career-building and self-development. The system would be fairer and more flexible, allowing an 18-year-old student to follow a

'traditional' full-time degree at one institution, whilst also allowing a mature, part-time student to 'earn and learn'. Ultimately, the choice would lie with the student.

Adult community education (ACE) should not have to lead to accreditation and it can provide learners from all walks of life the opportunity to gain new skills and add new experiences. The Liberal Democrats recognise volunteers and voluntary efforts play an important role in the function of this third sector. But this in no way diminishes the duty of government to provide adequate funding for ACE. Indeed, recent cuts in the skills arena, including informal adult learning, have begun to leave many courses dependent solely on the goodwill of volunteers. The decision to remove £100 million a year from ELQ courses is also remarkably short-sighted. The Liberal Democrats would reverse it.

For this reason, the Government's recent launch of its White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*, has a hollow ring to it. The Government takes the naïve view that simply by opening up spaces in public and private buildings, groups of adults will flock together to learn. Whilst providing places to learn is useful, it is only one element of successfully promoting adult learning. Without effective

government funding complementing voluntary efforts, the UK will fail to realise the full benefits that ACE has to offer. For this reason, the Liberal Democrats are pledging to transfer £100 million from the proposed increase in the Train to Gain budget (set to rise from £500 million to £925 million by 2009/10) into additional funding for ACE and would also transfer £400 million to specifically fund apprentice training costs.

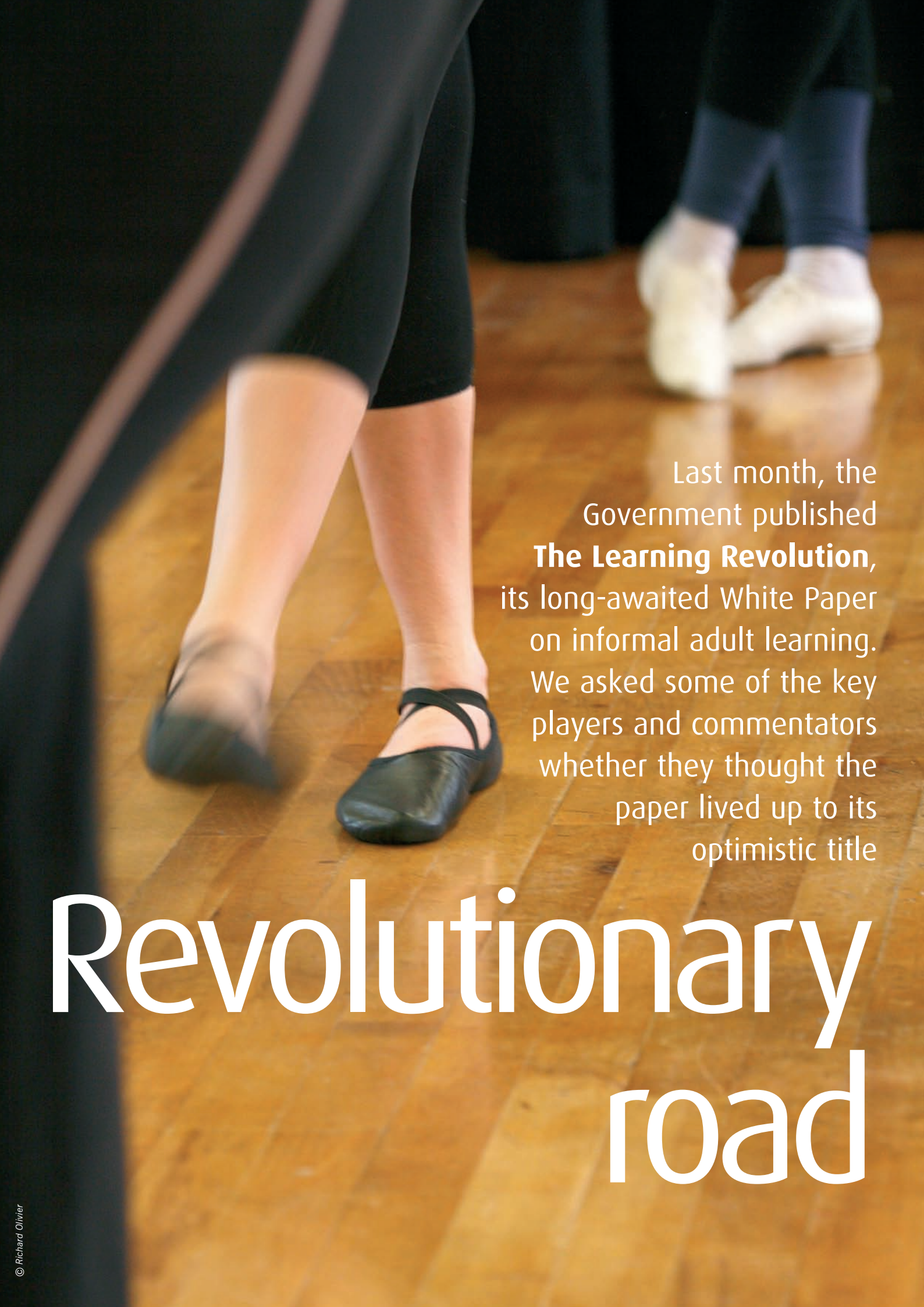
We are in the most extraordinary of economic times. Opinions differ on the measures needed to take the UK out of recession. The Liberal Democrats believe the most effective fiscal stimulus would be immediate investment in capital projects. Railways would offer a green route to recovery. The FE college capital building programme is another obvious candidate. Colleges are crucial to the development of our skills, and if we are to prosper beyond the recession then a skilled workforce is essential.

Stephen Williams is Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills

To read *The Learning Revolution* White Paper, go to: <http://www.dius.gov.uk/learningrevolution>.



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Last month, the Government published **The Learning Revolution**, its long-awaited White Paper on informal adult learning. We asked some of the key players and commentators whether they thought the paper lived up to its optimistic title

Revolutionary road

There is welcome recognition here of the value of informal learning, but funding remains a major issue, says **David Vincent**

In the midst of the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression, there is something rather admirable in the sight of no less than four government ministers – and David Blunkett – turning out to host the launch of a document which, at its heart, is a celebration of learning for its own sake.

The *Learning Revolution* White Paper shows some awareness of the current difficulties. There is a reference to the value of study to get people back to work, and the document is much taken with the idea of using newly empty shops as makeshift classrooms for adult learners. It stresses that ‘there is a moral imperative to find activity with purpose for those affected by the recession’. But the White Paper is the culmination of a consultation process which began well before the floor dropped out of the economy, and it does represent a serious attempt by John Denham and his team to foreground the importance of informal learning for, as it says, ‘its own intrinsic value’.

The Government is not, of course, inventing informal learning and its intervention may result in less than a full revolution, but there are good reasons for welcoming the effort that it has made.

From the perspective of the Open University, which has been promoting a wider culture of learning since its first BBC programmes (the majority of whose viewers were always non-students), the recognition by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) that its responsibilities should stretch beyond the credit-bound university sector is a significant move. At the Government level there is a statement of intent to integrate the resources of a range of departments, not only universities and skills but also schools, communities and local government, health and culture. There is to be a national advisory forum to ‘support and challenge Government’ as it implements the White Paper and local authorities are to be given a responsibility for connecting the delivery of the proposed initiatives at the community level.

The lengthy process of consultation has itself been instrumental in that it has brought together groups and agencies from across the sector. The University of the Third Age, the Workers’ Educational Association, the Church of England, the Museums Association, the National Federation of Women’s Institutes and Unionlearn have been among organisations having conversations which have revealed shared ambitions and mutually reinforcing strengths.

Resources remain a problem. There are some awkward paragraphs trying to walk around the cuts in further education adult learning funding which have caused so much

protest, and, in part, the document is a further attempt by the Government to widen the sources of investment in all levels of education. Nonetheless, as we run towards what is bound to be a new period of austerity in public spending, there should be a small cheer for the identification of £30 million to support innovation in informal learning in 2009-10. The OU is particularly interested in the ideas contained in the chapter on learning through technology and broadcasting, which offer the best opportunities not only of extending informal learning but also of creating pathways into appropriate levels of formal learning.

David Vincent is the Open University’s Pro-Vice Chancellor for Strategy and External Affairs

The White Paper gives museums, libraries and archives the best opportunity they have ever had to be part of a cohesive informal learning community, writes **Natasha Innocent**

It’s good to see that the *Learning Revolution* White Paper recognises the vital role museums, libraries and archives can play in the promotion of informal adult learning. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is determined to make this vision of lifelong learning a reality and has set itself a target of encouraging 3,000 individual museums, libraries and archives to sign up to the active promotion of learning for pleasure by March 2010.

And to assist the sector MLA has formed an Adult Learners Board which aims to strengthen partnership-working between museums, libraries and archives and a wider range of partners. It will do this by working together with bodies such as the Workers’ Educational Association in order to reach out to people who haven’t participated in informal adult learning before.

The Adult Learners Board, co-chaired by MLA Chief Executive Roy Clare and NIACE Chief Executive Alan Tuckett, will play a strong leadership role in shaping thinking between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and DIUS, and with other government departments too, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions.

In addition, MLA is backing the Open Space movement announced in the White Paper. There will be a new £100,000 Challenge Fund to encourage museums, libraries and archives to do more to open up their spaces and resources to support self-organised groups of learners in their community.

MLA would like to encourage our sector to see itself as a facilitator of public resources and space rather than solely a custodian. We want this question asked: ‘How can skills be shared in new ways to increase the use of museums, libraries and archives by other learning providers and self-organised groups of learners?’.

The Challenge Fund will encourage innovation and new thinking, with MLA awarding small grants to those museums, libraries and archives that come up with the best ideas. We will then share the best practice resulting with other museums, libraries and archives.

There are already MLA-funded adult learning projects, such as Different Landscapes, run at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. Residents from four homeless hostels worked with staff and a professional film maker to create a series of short films inspired by objects, galleries and themes found at the museum. The project helped residents develop team-working skills to increase their confidence and self-esteem.

The *Learning Revolution* White Paper gives museums, libraries and archives perhaps the best opportunity they have ever had to be identified as part of a cohesive informal learning community. It’s an opportunity that MLA believes the sector should grab with both hands and it is committed to working with DIUS to achieve a thriving culture of lifelong learning.

Natasha Innocent is Senior Policy Adviser, Learning and Skills, for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

It’s an opportunity to reassert the principle that participating in learning can strengthen communities, argues **Liz Smith**

Trade unions have been at the heart of informal adult learning throughout their history – campaigning for education for all and for public libraries, supporting night schools and Mechanics’ Institutes, and helping to establish the Workers’ Educational Association.

We welcomed John Denham’s debate about what constitutes informal adult learning in preparation for the White Paper, and contributed to the discussions. So we also welcome the reference in the White Paper to union learning representatives (ULRs) and the excellent work they do – work which has recently received an extra boost from Ofsted, which inspected the U-Net network of union learning centres and described the work of ULRs as outstanding. In particular, there was recognition of the excellent work that they do in reaching the most disadvantaged people in our society and we were very glad to see a clear desire in the White Paper to widen access to informal learning.

During the IAL consultation period we carried out a small survey of ULRs to find out what kinds of informal learning they were organising for their members. From partnerships with museums and art galleries to science cafes, walking clubs and book groups, ULRs got their members involved, often using Learning at Work Day to kick start the programmes.

A high proportion of informal learners move into other accredited programmes or are already improving their skills so that they can get on at work and contribute effectively to their union or their local community.

The White Paper proposes a number of new initiatives with which we will look forward to getting involved – which is why Unionlearn was among the first to sign up to the informal adult learning pledge. Those who sign the pledge commit themselves to being ‘ambassadors for informal learning, actively promoting participation and finding new ways to get more people involved’. We see it as an opportunity to reassert the collective – to be explicit that participating in learning can strengthen communities – whether in the locality, at work or within a

community of interest. We are already testing out models for collective learning funds at work – demonstrating that the union role in adult learning isn’t just an historic one, but is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

It’s also a growing one thanks to the more than 20,000 ULRs whose voluntary efforts recall and build on the vision of earlier union pioneers. Their determination and courage can be a stimulus to achieve a great deal for both workers and the country as a whole.

Liz Smith is Director of Unionlearn

The White Paper is long on rhetoric but short on significant proposals, writes **Richard Taylor**

We should be thankful for small mercies – though they are pretty small. What are the good things in this archetypal New Labour White Paper? There are some modest new resources: £20 million for a rather ill-defined

‘transformational’ learning fund; a ‘learning festival’; the recognition that adult learning informs the agenda of several government departments; sensible suggestions for co-ordination and for the dissemination of good practice; and the fact that the Government has recognised the importance, however minimally, of what it terms, rather patronisingly, ‘informal adult learning’.

However, that said, this is a lacklustre document: a passé, anti-climactic mood prevails. This is exacerbated by the tired rhetoric of New Labour – the White Paper is very long on rhetoric (even by the standards of New Labour), and very short indeed on both ‘reforming passion’, which used to characterise even moderate Labourism, and similarly light on significant proposals.

The White Paper skirts around the calamitous state of publicly funded adult learning. There are nearly two million fewer adult learners in the broadly defined further education sector than a few years ago; there are now only a handful of specialist university adult education departments in England, and those that remain are under very severe pressure – primarily because of the



discredited policy on equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs); part-time adult learners are systematically discriminated against in the funding regimes of all sectors; and, importantly, Government policy continues to focus very largely upon (crudely defined) skills education for young people. On all these issues the White Paper is silent.

Even more fundamentally, there is no recognition of any concept of *lifelong learning*, and, yet again, by implication, the anachronistic distinction between vocational and non-vocational (and between part-time and full-time) is preserved.

Similarly, there is little understanding of the need to emphasise social-purpose, political education, in a community, collective interest. We are in a crisis of democracy, as well as of (capitalist) economics, but there is no recognition here of the potentially pivotal role of adult education. Labour rhetoric lacks all resonance with the radical, democratic socialist educational voice (and passion) of Tawney, Lindsay and Mansbridge – let alone of Thompson and Williams. Still less does it connect with today's social movements for radical change. Adult education for

empowerment? As an engine of social and progressive change in an unequal and deeply flawed society? No. This White Paper is cast in the same old New Labour mould, tied into a now demonstrably failed ideology.

All in all, a sad commentary on wasted opportunities – and a far cry from *The Learning Age*.

Richard Taylor is Director of the Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge

Much of City Lit's provision falls within the Government's definition of 'informal learning', but do these opportunities really belong in the same category as book clubs, asks Peter Davies

The obvious commitments to adult learning from John Denham and DIUS, as articulated in the White Paper, are very heartening. The paper has many positive messages and innovative ideas about how we can spread the word about the value of learning and encourage many more people to engage. Trying to regain lost ground for adults in terms of funding will remain an issue, but the additional funds for transformation projects should provide some useful pump priming for new initiatives. I also welcome the ideas around community learning champions, especially as we can work with them to support our strong outreach programmes, as well as encouraging more disadvantaged/disengaged groups to start learning again.

However, I do still feel extremely uneasy that a large proportion of our provision, including some which results in a qualification, now falls under this rather loose 'informal' definition. The many informal opportunities mentioned in the paper can be very different indeed. But I would argue that many of the opportunities are definitely not the same as structured classroom/studio based courses, delivered by qualified, professional and often expert tutors, where the learning aims are clearly defined, match the needs of the particular group of individuals, and are subject to stringent performance measurement and quality monitoring and improvement processes. It feels very uncomfortable for this type of provision to be grouped in the same category as a book club or guided tour of a nature reserve, valuable though they may be in their own right.

The inclusion of 'non-vocational' as part of the descriptor could also be counterproductive. Surely non-accredited drama, jewellery, creative writing, journalism and health classes, which lead directly to employment opportunities, are vocational? Other accredited courses provide the exact

qualification needed for employment, effectively a 'licence to practice', although, as they are not full Level 2 or 3, they are now labelled as 'informal'. This approach risks underplaying the economic value of non-accredited learning and surely what our learners tell us must carry weight: 86 per cent reported that their personal development course helped at work. For me, there is a little too much emphasis on the role of current and emerging technology. Clearly, it has an increasing and important place in learning, either stand-alone or preferably as an adjunct to other learning. But I am also struck by how often people tell us that learning with a diverse group of people, led by a professional tutor, is an absolutely fundamental part of the attraction of coming to courses at City Lit.

These are important issues for us, but we will work to maximise the many opportunities this paper presents, whilst still flying the flag for the unique value of high-quality, classroom-based courses for all. I hope that, as policies develop further, due recognition will be given to the fact that not all informal learning is the same. It is vital that a strong base of formal course-based provision is offered alongside the truly informal and voluntary opportunities.

Peter Davies is the Principal of City Lit

There is much to welcome, but there is not enough recognition of the role practitioners play in delivering adult learning, says Sally Hunt

The University and College Union (UCU) welcomes the Government's White Paper on informal adult learning. This is an area in great need of attention after the years of neglect in favour of programmes leading to qualifications, and we are delighted that the Government has agreed to £30 million in extra funding, especially at a time when resources are limited. It is good that this new money won't come out of the already overstretched personal and community development learning pot, and I would like to pay tribute to John Denham for initiating this consultation and White Paper.

There are a number of major plus points in the White Paper: the identification of resources from other government departments that contribute to informal adult learning on the ground, the intention to have a more joined-up government approach to adult learning, and the proposed national forum, are all steps in the right direction. The UCU hopes that, as the main representative of tutors in informal adult learning, we will have a presence at the forum so that the voices of practitioners can be heard.

The UCU also welcomes the new role local authorities would play in leading efforts to



co-ordinate informal and non-formal learning at local level. Having a framework within local government that will allow for a performance indicator for informal adult learning will allow local authorities to be held to account.

We are also interested in the proposals on the use of new technology, which will hopefully enable individuals and organisations to link up, and find new teaching and learning resources.

We are disappointed, however, that the White Paper focuses so much attention on informal adult learning, at the expense of non-formal adult learning, and that it doesn't give enough recognition to the role of the practitioner in delivering adult learning and giving coherence to, often, somewhat inarticulate learner needs and desires. Many of the developments in adult learning that have become mainstream, such as adult literacy, numeracy, ESOL, family learning and Access courses, were developed out of non-formal adult learning by practitioners.

The White Paper will, unfortunately, not contribute a great deal to the restoration of the 1.4 million lost adult learning places. Much of the support that the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning has attracted is precisely because of the anger that many adult learners felt on losing these taught courses.

The UCU hopes that the impetus generated by the publication of the White Paper will signal the linking of informal adult learning to non-formal adult learning, for those who want and need progression to higher and deeper levels of learning. Despite our reservations and concerns, we will continue to fight for a comprehensive curriculum for adult learning that is varied, affordable and accessible, and to be part of the discussions that will follow the publication of the White Paper.

Sally Hunt is General Secretary of the University and College Union

The real 'revolution' is about bringing learning back to the people, argues Helen Milner

Having worked in online education for almost 25 years, *The Learning Revolution* feels like a very welcome return to the values of widening participation. It's also our best chance in years to really level the learning playing field, and I'm fascinated to see how technology is still giving us new ways and new means of doing so.

Digital skills appear as both a subject for and means of informal learning. New technologies really can empower and motivate people, not just to discover and explore but to create and innovate. At UK Online centres that journey often starts out as the most informal of information gathering. It's then built up by responding to an

individual's priorities and needs, focusing on the person rather than the course or qualification.

For the most socially excluded, 'formal' education can be inaccessible, intimidating and impractical. If you need to bid for a council house online, for instance, you don't want to wait until term starts and sit through an entire ICT qualification for the internet bit to come up. That's where UK Online centres come in, supported by a huge range of third-sector intermediaries and partners. Learning and support are local, personal and flexible, often long-term and often don't include traditional educational milestones. I'm delighted to see the value of that work officially recognised and endorsed in this White Paper. I'm also pleased that at the Tate Modern launch John Denham got to meet for himself some UK Online centres learners who have already benefitted from this sort of provision.

It's because UK Online centres have a local presence that we're in a prime position to help government realise this very important vision. UK Online centres are already taking laptops out to pubs, community centres, even empty shops, to make access to digital skills and support as easy as possible for as many people as possible. The *Learning Revolution* 'open space' initiative will see us build on that work across the country.

This is an exciting time for skills, and a chance to really make learning a possibility and a reality for those who most need opportunities and support to see them through the economic downturn. At its best, informal learning isn't just a gateway to 'formal' learning or a home for hobbyists – it can be a route to social inclusion and mobility.

That's where this White Paper can and must make a real difference to real lives. The real 'revolution' is about bringing learning back to the people, so they can own it, direct it and follow it as they see fit. That's something I'm excited to be a part of.

Helen Milner is Managing Director of UK Online centres

It's good that so many government departments are onboard, but the paper fails to recognise that some of the key barriers to learning sit outside its remit, writes David Sinclair

The publication of *The Learning Revolution* will hopefully mark a significant and exciting turning point in the recent history of the Government's approach to adult learning. Three or four years ago, there was little interest. Cynical voices in our organisations argued that the only thing civil servants



leading this area had any time to do was to respond to letters, explaining to people why their courses had been cut.

For four or five years, the Age Concern and Help the Aged postbag has included a consistent flow of letters from older people, expressing concern that their local opportunities for learning were being cut. And when we asked older people to contribute their thoughts on what the Government should include as part of its strategy, we had many hundreds of responses.

Talking to MPs and ministers about the issue, it was always clear that it wasn't just us getting the letters. Their postbags were full too. And over the last two years, partly due to ministerial interest, and in particular, the leadership of John Denham, we have seen renewed interest and action.

And after a year of debate on informal adult learning (IAL), the Government has produced a White Paper with some new ideas. Better promotion of learning and convincing organisations to show their commitment to IAL could be very useful. Equally, finding ways of creating and making open spaces will be a vital component to further opening up access and opportunities. Improving access to information is vital and the web portal proposals could be very useful (but they probably won't solve the information gap for



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those not online).

It is very welcome that Baroness Morris has been asked to review the extent to which the need for basic ICT skills is being met, but in the context of the Government's Digital Inclusion action plan and the *Digital Britain* interim review, there is a real risk that ministers will fall over each other's reviews, particularly in an area where we already know the answers! We must ensure that reviews don't put off action.

Perhaps one of the big weaknesses is the failure of the White Paper to recognise that some of the key barriers to learning sit outside the remit. It is welcome that so many government departments are onboard but the paper doesn't seem to recognise the barriers to learning caused by poor transport, age discrimination or fear of crime.

The Government will soon be publishing a 'refresh' of its ageing strategy and the White Paper commits to including learning within the plan. This will be key to ensuring delivery of some of the potential for older people.

And the final but unspoken point, of course, is that old-style subsidised courses are disappearing. There is little cash around for concessions or to fund learning opportunities. The Government is keen to move more towards self-organised learning, but there are questions about who will benefit

from this. Getting the most disadvantaged involved in learning is likely to require resource input of some kind.

David Sinclair is Head of Policy, Age Concern and Help the Aged

Though positive, the White Paper undervalues the role of informal learning as a way into formal skills provision, says **Tricia Hartley**

The Campaign for Learning welcomes the *Learning Revolution* White Paper – despite understandable concerns about its call for 'a new national campaign for learning'! As an organisation established to champion access to learning for everyone traditional providers find 'hard to reach', we're delighted it embraces a wide variety of types and contexts of learning and explicitly commits to improving access for disadvantaged groups. We welcome the opening of public spaces for self-organised learning and the £20 million transformation fund to support new

partnerships and innovation, which has the potential to make a real difference at local level.

A big step forward is the cross-government support the White Paper has attracted. The acid test, however, is what happens next – what action will the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Communities and Local Government take as a result of their ministers' approving noises? If access to public buildings and broader dissemination of information follows, this will be helpful. If the contribution of adult learning to improving health, reducing crime, bringing communities together and making neighbourhoods safer is explicitly tied into the policies and targets of other departments, the effect could be truly transformational.

Joined-up government was one of the early ambitions of the present administration, but the record is patchy. We're finally seeing clear progress on linking employment and skills – but meanwhile we've all become used to the bizarre distinction between 'learning' and 'skills' embodied in policies, structure and practice – as if the second of these was not a result of the first! The White Paper misses an opportunity here. Under pressure over the loss of adult learning places, John Denham wanted to stress the value of

learning for its own sake, and, as a result, downplayed the role of informal learning as a way into formal 'skills' provision, particularly for learners who are nervous or who have had bad previous experiences. The key role of informal learning here parallels its contribution to other departments' agendas, and it's important that we allow ourselves to be explicit about its instrumental value in our own sector too, without feeling that by doing so we're denying its intrinsic worth.

And, finally, there remains an elephant in the marvellous new room we're opening up for informal learning – the issue of what we mean by quality and how we assure it in flexible, relevant, appropriate ways. In mourning the loss of so many traditional adult learning places, we've tended to avoid mentioning that, while many such losses were indeed tragic, not all traditional adult learning was of high quality or a worthy recipient of public funds. If the *Learning Revolution* is to be a real one, we need a debate about quality that seeks a much broader, more all-embracing, more learner-led definition. To practise what we preach about the benefits of informal learning, we must be a sector that doesn't shrink from the uncomfortable aspects of this discussion, but relishes opposing views, engages in vigorous debate and learns from it.

Tricia Hartley is Chief Executive of the Campaign for Learning

Local authorities must seize the opportunity to justify the confidence placed in the sector, writes **Marc Mason**

What did I hope would be in the White Paper? Certainly, I hoped there would be recognition of the pivotal role of local authorities in the future of informal adult learning as local leaders and co-ordinators. I also wanted the contribution informal adult learning can make to both national and local agendas as diverse as community cohesion, mental health and wellbeing to be recognised and celebrated. The White Paper would need to present challenges to all partners to work closer, find innovative ways of stimulating and delivering learning, and present means by which DIUS would support and promote the initiatives that emerge. Extra resources to allow this to happen would have been a massive bonus.

So, yes, I am delighted with *The Learning Revolution*. However, I am also quite concerned. It would be too easy to think that in a time of austerity, it is best to sit tight, maybe batten down the hatches and let others move the agenda forward. That would be a massive mistake and a missed opportunity for our local communities. In most, if not all, authorities we can improve our signposting to learning opportunities, we can establish and develop better links with self-organised groups and the local media, and we can

certainly further develop our use of IT. LEAFA will be encouraging everybody to seize the challenges presented by the White Paper and to justify the confidence that has been placed in our sector.

Marc Mason is Chair of LEAFA, the Local Education Authorities Forum for the Education of Adults

It's good in parts but we need to be more radical in championing the place of adult education in other agendas, argues **Ceri Williams**

One of the student trustees at the Mary Ward Centre said to me, 'There's very little in this White Paper to object to. There's very little in it. Even as students of a protected institution we are facing very lean times indeed, with increased fees for students and staff reductions and so the tone of celebration rings rather hollow'. That's no doubt true, but my answer is that John Denham should be congratulated for having obtained at least some new money in these straitened times and we're grateful that he's so clearly interested in our corner of the sector.

I say to that student: Yes, they're still calling it informal learning, which only captures part of the landscape they survey and is a misleading term for the rest of it. Yes, they're trying to launch a new movement around six principles when there already is a movement around six principles – CALL. Yes, it doesn't say anything about freezing the fee assumption hike that's going to hit all adult students on low incomes so hard from September. Yes, the quality of teaching and learning, led by a professional workforce, belonging to the new professional body, the Institute for Learning – still the priority for so many of us – is hardly mentioned. And yes, the total replacement of trained teachers by peer adult educators during the Cultural Revolution is not generally deemed to have been a great success.

But, there are also some fine ideas and ideals in the paper, drawn from the consultation. And so, of course, we are keen to contribute to making them happen – a festival; the open space campaign; the commitment to sharing CPD with leaders of self-organised groups; to sharing expertise and materials; to creating a new indicator for adult learning in spending rounds; working with local museums and voluntary sector councils; supporting self-organised groups; cross-subsidising provision; helping Ofsted develop new models for inspection; helping establish a national advisory forum to steer strategy. Indeed, the Specialist Designated Institutions (SDIs) have organised a seminar in June to discuss how we can contribute to all the actions listed in the paper.

Of course, there are some bits that are just



frustrating. The demand for FE colleges, but not universities, to publish their strategies for opening up spaces for community use is unlikely to go down well. And while the emphasis on joining-up is important, why not 'join up' and extend to adult learning other government policies that affect adult learners much more than some disconnection between classes in the GPs surgery and in an adult education centre, when there's enough need and demand for both? If the Government's own rhetoric on trusting consumer choice for individuals and employers was followed up then provision in colleges would now truly be various and comprehensive, and would include vocational qualifications alongside 'developmental' non-accredited courses.

As for the fee assumption continuing to increase, even if the policy did make sense in 2005, it's daft at a time when inflation is heading towards zero. The net effect will be fewer people learning – in particular, the new poor, low-paid workers and people whose pension pot is diminishing.

So, after our chat about the White Paper, the student trustee and I have managed to agree that it's certainly good in parts, but just needs to be more radical in its championing of the place of adult education as a key part of other agendas. Our part of the sector is not



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an add-on, but an important part of the mix of provision in a rational society.

We're very grateful indeed, as an SDI, to have some government funding to deliver non-formal adult learning. We take very seriously indeed our resultant duty during these lean years to survive and to act as a gene pool for high-quality adult education, with deep values committing us to ever widening participation and to getting better and better at what we do. Roll on the learning revolution, we say.

Ceri Williams is Principal of the Mary Ward Centre

The vision and strategy are sound – the problems are likely to arise in the execution, writes Sally Dicketts

It is really good to see that the Government is taking a much broader view on what it considers as learning. Its previous obsession with adults gaining nationally recognised

qualifications is widening and at least the Government is valuing learning for its own sake. My belief, however, is that the FE sector has always viewed all learning as critical to the up-skilling agenda. In fact, at one time, most colleges and adult education departments within local authorities had outreach centres. These were based in their local communities, supporting, encouraging and leading the way in providing under-confident learners with the stepping stones to further education and a more skilled future. Many of these centres catered for the socially disadvantaged and older people mentioned in this White Paper, but, unfortunately, the cost of running such centres became prohibitive as government policies and funding changed, so they were closed.

The Learning Revolution, in many cases, is preaching to the converted and its basic premise is a good one. But, unfortunately, like much government policy, while the vision and strategy are sound, the execution is where the rot could set in. The success of much informal learning lies in its spontaneity; it meets groups of people's needs at that moment in time. It can't be orchestrated so when trying to capitalise on this learning, care needs to be taken not to do harm to this very organic process.

The major ideas I picked out of this paper are: recognising informal learning's contribution and providing a framework to support it; linking up all the learning routes and sign-posting them to all learners; using technology more creatively and innovatively to support learning; and ensuring people who are socio-economically disadvantaged, as well as older people and families, have good access to informal learning.

These are sensible ideas, but there is little new money available for this work, approximately £20 million in the transformation fund. The rest will come from existing budgets being used differently and in a more joined-up way. Again, there are greater expectations on local authorities to co-ordinate and flex funding to meet these new criteria, with yet more national indicators.

At the end of the day, it is people who make things happen. So with increased interest in volunteering and helping others, maybe a more joined-up approach will lead to more people experiencing the joy of learning in all its guises, enabling them to have a better quality of life. I do hope the White Paper proves to be that catalyst for change.

Sally Dicketts is Principal of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College

We need a system that combines both the traditional and the technological in learning, argues **Jane Williams**

Becta was delighted to sign the informal adult learning pledge announced in the White Paper. Informal adult learning is a special and distinct part of the FE and skills sector. We should value it for its strong personal element. The White Paper rightly recognises how, every year, thousands of us see informal learning as the ideal way to pursue our interests and hobbies and – just as importantly – how, for many people, informal learning can be their first successful step in a system which, so far, has failed them.

Informal learning is also distinctive in its relationship with technology. We know that, in general terms, technology improves motivation, progress and results. But there's an extra dimension in informal learning. The White Paper talks a lot about self-organised learning. Technology can have a huge impact here. For the individual or for small groups working alone, it does what technology perhaps does best. It opens up the world (not least for those who find it difficult to get to classes outside the home), bringing them up-to-date resources, a wealth of information and easy communication channels.

That doesn't at all mean discounting the traditional informal learning approach. In Becta we want to see a system which caters for both the traditional and the technological, a system which supports a blending of the two. Where technology is used properly – whether it's an art appreciation class in a village hall or an individual researching his family history at home – its impact can be huge. But it doesn't mean that the art students shouldn't get expert personal support in developing their colour-mixing or fine brush skills, or that the family historian shouldn't also visit the local archives or library.

That's why Becta has, over the last year, worked with the Government and others to develop the White Paper proposals, and why the agency has been invited by John Denham to take responsibility for several of them. In the next few months, Becta will be: supporting the particular training and development needs of the informal learning workforce to help them use technology effectively; developing a directory of online resources sign-posting people to the materials held by institutions like the British Library; running a trial to explore how its Home Access programme might be extended to help disadvantaged adults; and exploring with broadcasters how best to make content and information available through the standard television set-top box and via digital TV platforms.

Becta is committed to making technology work for informal learners and for their providers. We'd love to hear from anyone with views on how best to

support our White Paper projects.

Jane Williams is Executive Director for FE, Regeneration and Delivery, Becta

There is evidence here of how seriously lifelong learning is being taken but the loss of taught adult education courses remains a concern, writes **Richard Bolsin**

Solutions requiring legislation normally mean there's a problem which government needs to fix. As legislation is often the outcome of a White Paper, and I don't recall responses to the consultation last year suggesting systemic failure or breakdown, I welcome the absence of recourse to legislation in *The Learning Revolution*. Instead, it offers a framework and some modest incentives for people to work together to develop solutions which best meet the needs of adult learners. The logic is simple – get involved or stop complaining. Solutions are now in our own hands.

There is much else to welcome in *The Learning Revolution*. It's the first White Paper ever on adult learning, for one thing, which is evidence itself of how seriously lifelong learning is beginning to be taken. Another is the support it has from six government departments (although I do wonder where DEFRA is, given the serious issues affecting rural communities). It will be difficult, too, for any new government to disagree with it.

Then there are the extra resources. £30 million may not sound much, but in the worst global recession for nearly a century it would be churlish to belittle the achievement of winning those arguments with the Treasury. The transformation fund, which will contain £20 million of that money, will be vital in ensuring that outcomes match expectations. I also hope the introduction of an indicator in future spending rounds for lifelong learning is not just considered but implemented without delay. We should all be urging that to happen.

Nobody opposes the case for government thinking and action to be more joined-up, locally and nationally, but many of us are very sceptical about it happening to the extent we would like. The 'new package of support for community learning champions, learning ambassadors and other foot soldiers' (do we know who they are or are going to be?), the role of local authorities in providing 'the local leadership to create a joined-up, innovative and broad local learning offer' is easy to say and write, but a very different proposition to put into practice. Do we know the people who will be fulfilling those roles in each council? If not, we should be finding out right now and asking to meet them.

I have some disappointments. Where are

the case studies and examples from health, civic inclusion or rural communities? Lifelong learning is not just about leisure and pleasure. Nor will I adopt the language of 'informal adult learning'. Lifelong learning is too important to be sidelined in that way, and at least as effective as other forms of learning in its contribution to the economy, employment and adults' prospects of securing work-related qualifications. I'm sorry that the White Paper fails to make that point adequately. Many generic, core skills in the workplace, including team-work, leadership and the ability to communicate effectively are not learned in formal environments but through more informal experiences, which include voluntary work, hobbies, sport and adult community learning.

I continue to be concerned that over 1.4 million places have been lost in the last two years in English adult education due to cuts and fee rises. In a time of recession, affordable access to the life-changing opportunities provided by education is the hallmark of a civilised society and should be simultaneously expanded, resourced and promoted alongside work-based skills training. Along with CALL, I still want to see immediate action to: ensure a full range of learning opportunities for adults; adjust the personal and community development learning budget to increase with inflation; and redirect any under-spend on the Train to Gain programme to meet individual learner demand.

The White Paper goes some of the way towards some of this, and I welcome and support that, but the case for CALL remains undiminished.

Richard Bolsin is General Secretary of the Workers' Educational Association

The planned review of ICT skills for adults is an opportunity to reverse several years of decline, says **Alan Clarke**

The announcement that Estelle Morris is to chair an independent review of ICT skills for adults is very welcome. *The Learning Revolution* provides relatively few details of what the review will cover but it is clear that the focus is on meeting the basic ICT skills needs of adult learners. The Government's decision to make ICT a Skill for Life, and later a functional skill, seemed to indicate that it saw ICT as fundamental to adults leading full social and economic lives. However, the limited support that followed has seriously reduced the impact of the decisions. The review provides the opportunity to survey basic ICT provision to ensure that we can go forward with fit-for-purpose provision.

There is a range of issues that the review



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needs to consider. The reducing provision of basic ICT courses is not due to a lack of interest in ICT from adult providers but more to funding that does not cover the costs of community-based or more informal courses. Learners returning to education need more support and time to develop the required skills. This is especially true if learners cannot access computers between sessions. In order to reach the six million adults, identified by the Digital Inclusion action plan, who are both lacking in ICT skills and socially excluded requires community-based provision. Funding seems based on a model of delivery that assumes confident, independent adult learners, and many socially excluded people are not self confident and do not have robust study skills.

The ICT Skill for Life and functional skills standards are very similar and stress the importance of purposeful delivery, that is, provision that focuses on providing learners with the skills to meet their needs in both their social and economic lives. ICT is not a static set of skills. It is a vibrant and dynamic subject that is continuously changing and developing. It is essential that learners develop the skills to cope with change and are able to transfer their understanding to new situations and applications. The need is for a funding and delivery model that allows disadvantaged learners to learn in a suitable context (for example, in small groups, purposefully, equipped to deal with change, effectively supported and community-based).

ICT is often seen as a motivating factor in

attracting Skills for Life learners, and there is a clear relationship between ICT and literacy and numeracy, suggesting a need for teachers with good skills in both subjects. The review should consider the possibilities for integrating the different Skills for Life together, and what would be required to realise this potential.

The need for the review to consider funding, delivery models and relationships with the other Skills for Life is important but speed also is vital. There have been several years of adult ICT basic skills decline and the need is for a quick review and an equally swift implementation of recommendations.

Alan Clarke is Associate Director, ICT and Learning, NIACE