

# 'Our aim is to put learners in the driving seat'

The values of fairness, responsibility and freedom are at the heart of the government's skills strategy, says **JOHN HAYES**, with the greatest support going to those who need it most

**W**hen some people think of post-18 education, they only perceive real merit in the traditional university route. The central role that further education plays in our economy and society is often overlooked and undervalued. In truth, further education for adults, whether in a college, at work, or an informal evening class, not only has the power to improve people's skills and employment opportunities, but also to transform lives.

Not everyone sets out on the right path in life first time. Nor is everyone suited to academic study. Many people's tastes and talents lie elsewhere. As a society, and as an economy, we need to harness and nurture these aptitudes and provide the right learning opportunities to help people to fulfil their potential.

The hundreds of thousands of young people and older adults who are trying to improve their skills matter every bit as much as those who go to university; indeed, they are crucial to economic recovery and sustainable growth. There is strong empirical evidence to show the connection between skills training in the labour force and productivity and competitiveness. It also helps us to be flexible and meet the skills demands of the fast-moving global economy.

Last month, Vince Cable and I launched our new skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, outlining this government's vision for radical reform of the FE and skills system. It sets out our vision of how to improve the skills levels in the labour force to support sustainable economic growth and how we will help many more individuals onto the right path in life.

Our aim is to put learners, and not the state, in the driving seat. Our Big Society ambitions are about creating the right conditions for people to shape the local services they want. We want to provide the funding, support and information they need to make the right choices and improve their lives. We will free colleges and employers from unnecessary bureaucracy so they are better able to work

together to make sure local skills needs are being met.

This government's core values of fairness, responsibility and freedom are at the heart of the strategy. We will ensure that the greatest support is given to those who need it the most.

Anyone who has left school without basic skills will be guaranteed access to free training, and we will make that training more effective.

For the unemployed, improving skills can be one of the key ways in which they gain, and progress in, employment. Those on active benefits will be supported with a targeted state subsidy to improve their labour market-relevant skills. Job Centre Plus will work with local colleges and training providers to determine how best to meet the needs of the local community and economy.

## Skills and employment

Better alignment across the skills and employment systems will ensure that all these individuals get the right help at the right time. My department is working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that this happens.

The government is committed to removing all the barriers that stop people with disabilities and learning difficulties getting into employment. That means ensuring there is a diverse range of learning opportunities on offer and the right support in the workplace.

We will also ensure that prison learning becomes increasingly personalised and relevant to the job market. Re-offending costs the UK £9 billion every year and offenders tell us that getting a job is the most significant element preventing re-offending.

While we will support the vulnerable and most disadvantaged and help young people get their first foot on the ladder, we also recognise that learners and employers benefit directly from training. We will expect those employers and learners undertaking intermediate and higher-level training to share responsibility by contributing towards

the cost.

To support adults to make that investment in their future, from the 2013-14 academic year we will introduce government-backed loans which learners will only start repaying once they are earning a decent wage. The loans will be available to learners aged over 24 and undertaking qualifications at Level 3 or above.

## Increasing participation

In the skills strategy we also outlined our proposals for every adult in the country to be offered a Lifelong Learning Account when they begin a new course, with the ultimate aim of increasing adult participation in learning. The accounts will bring together information about learning opportunities, grant funding and loans. Through better information people will be able to make better decisions about when and where to learn and how to invest their own funds. And they will help all adults engage with learning throughout their lives.

Allowing colleges and training providers the freedom they need to respond quickly and flexibly to the needs of learners and employers is also critical. We have already started to free colleges and training providers from the burdensome bureaucracy that inhibits effective responses. Continuing to do this, as well as radically simplifying the adult funding system, is a fundamental component of the strategy.

Another key aim for this government is to achieve a greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. Over recent years we have seen the demotion of practical learning in favour of academic pursuits. I believe this has been to our national detriment. The Arts and Crafts movement recognised the unbreakable link between satisfaction in work and quality of life – between craft and beauty. These arguments hold true in the modern world.

We must re-evaluate the way that skills are seen and the value they add to individual employment prospects, life experience, the



character of a civil society and to the capacity to stimulate and maintain economic growth.

This means redefining what a sector-led skills system with a place for guilds might look like. And also continuing to support and protect adult community learning and the role it plays in the lives of individuals and local communities.

However, it will be our success in re-establishing the apprenticeship as the primary work-based learning route that will play the central role. The government is determined to take *real* action to improve and expand the apprenticeships programme

and create more apprenticeship opportunities than ever before. By 2014-15, we will have in place sufficient funding for 75,000 more adult apprenticeship places than the previous government were providing.

Apprenticeships are valued by employers, sought after by learners and vital to securing future growth. They represent exactly the kind of social partnerships that we want to see. So we will put them at the heart of the skills system.

Apprenticeships can be a means of satisfying skills needed at Entry level as well as helping people progress in their chosen

careers. They are both real jobs and a chance to learn, offering the opportunity to acquire practical skills in a work environment. People who progress to an advanced apprenticeship earn, on average, £105,000 more over their lifetime than those with a Level 2 qualification or less.

I also recognise the great work many companies already do around vocational training to raise skills and drive growth. There are measures that would support growth, such as the introduction of professional standards to increase skills in particular occupations in appropriate sectors. We will establish a new Growth and Innovation Fund of up to £50 million to support employers collectively to be more ambitious about raising skills in their sectors and to promote workplace practices that will lead to better development and deployment of workplace knowledge and skills.

To support learners and employers, we must redefine what a sectoral-led approach to skills means. I want to see sector organisations rise to the challenge of creating a sense of pride in modern occupations by giving individual workers a sense of worth; in effect, becoming guilds for the 21st Century.

In all this, I do not want to lose sight of the importance of learning for learning's sake and what it can do for individuals, families and communities. Informal learning builds confidence, fosters independent living, helps people get online and supports progression to skills-focused learning and more rewarding work.

There is also plenty of evidence to demonstrate the tremendous mental and physical health benefits it brings. For example, research shows that older people who engage in learning keep mentally and physically active, can live healthier lives and preserve their independence longer, meeting head-on the challenges of deprivation, disability and isolation.

We have protected the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget, with £210 million allocated in 2011-12 and the same amount indicated for 2012-13. And it will continue to be a priority as we finalise the allocations for future years.

We will work with our partners to reform informal adult learning to ensure that it plays its part in developing the Big Society and creating progression opportunities for people who are disadvantaged and have had little access to learning in the past.

The skills strategy sets out how we intend to strengthen adult education in all its guises – vocational training, apprenticeships, community learning, basic skills, help to get back into work. Its radical approach will not only improve the UK skills base and build sustainable long-term growth, but it also has the potential to transform individuals' lives and reinvigorate communities.

*John Hayes is Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning*