

# 'Look for the small print – even when it's not there'

There are things in the skills White Paper that those who care passionately about lifelong learning and the empowerment of adult learners will welcome. But as well as admiring the angels in the architecture we need to look for the devils in the detail, says **GORDON MARSDEN**

**W**hen I sat on the universities and skills select committee we looked at the practical implications of Lord Leitch's challenge to unlock the potential of our population, building world-class skills in order, as he said, 'to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice'. We asked civil servants to produce a diagram of the funding streams through which Leitch's vision was to be achieved. Some months later, they produced a mind-bogglingly complex graphic web – with which we illustrated our eventual report. It was a classic illustration of how, in this area, we constantly have to juggle the noblest aspirations for life-changing learning opportunities with the forensic attention to detail, in this case hacking a way through the funding jungle, needed to achieve those aspirations. Two years on, that's still the challenge – not least in trying to judge of the latest attempt, the coalition government's skills strategy White Paper. I am looking, as all of us who care passionately about lifelong learning and the empowerment of adult learners should, for angels in architecture. But that can't be divorced from watching out for the devils in the detail.

The White Paper cannot be considered apart from the spending review settlement which preceded it and the demands made by the 25 per cent cut in the overall budget for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Credit must be given where it is due. I'm glad that in John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, we have someone with a strong personal commitment to the value and future of vocational learning. It is clear that he fought hard to keep the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget, introduced by Labour's Ivan Lewis in 2003, ring-fenced from Treasury

predators. There is, of course, no provision as yet to uprate it and preserve its real value for succeeding years. We will want to see what the fine print of the proposals to 'reform' the fund amount to. But I hope it won't involve bureaucracy that could be costly and disruptive – or mean shoehorning funding into a narrow, top-down view of the Cabinet Office's vision of Big Society.

Lifelong learning's situation cannot be divorced from the circumstances in which further education institutions now find themselves. The government's cut of 25 per cent in their basic resource grant could put a number of them under severe financial pressure, limiting the range of courses and, in some cases, places for adult learners.

## Funding arrangements

On top of this, the changes proposed in funding arrangements for over-24s at Levels 2 and 3 will not only hit their expectations of publicly funded support – both at work and in college – but also, in the process, depress college income streams. The House of Commons Library has carried out modelling on the impact of the changes that shows that an average-sized FE college that receives £8 million from the Skills Funding Agency could stand to lose 30 per cent of that income as a result of these changes.

There are more subtle pitfalls that could fetter people's aspirations for new skills and knowledge, whether for personal fulfilment or career advancement. 'Nudge' theory is much in vogue with government policymakers. But we need to remember that people can be nudged away from things as well as towards them. If the prices of Level 2 and Level 3 courses rise significantly in colleges – with funding and support for them withdrawn for the majority of adults – there's no guarantee



those people will cheerfully sign up to loan schemes the details of which have yet to be spelt out and which could result in a repayment bill of between £5,000 to £9,000 for those doing adult apprenticeships, as John Hayes admitted in a recent *Guardian* interview.

The disincentives could be even stronger for adult learners wanting to pursue degree courses in higher education via the FE sector, like many at my own constituency's Blackpool and the Fylde College who study for Lancaster University-validated degrees.

The impact tuition fee rises of up to £9,000 a year, and the government's cutting of the HE teaching budget by 80 per cent-plus, will have on adult FE learners in HE has been largely passed by in the mainstream media coverage of the Browne review and its aftermath. Yet it

could be devastating for a sector which, until now, has been expanding – to account for 10 per cent of all HE courses.

Sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for. Treating part-time students on the same basis as full-time learners for loan eligibility is an excellent principle long fought for. But it will be delivered in a new HE landscape the reality of which will, as NIACE Chief Executive Alan Tuckett has said, involve ‘the proposed withdrawal of all or most public support for teaching’, which, in turn, will ‘make the price for part-time study daunting to many who might benefit’. In practice, adult part-timers currently paying perhaps £500 or £600 a year *pro-rata* for a £3,290 HE course delivered via FE, could end up paying five or six times that amount, with most HE institutions charging between £8,000 and £9,000.

Assessing how severe the impact will be is made more difficult by the government’s refusal to publish its White Paper until well into the new year, some time after this month’s vote on raising HE fees to £9,000. This is reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland* – verdict first, trial afterwards. But, as Claire Callender and Bill Jones warned in November’s *Adults Learning*, the impact could be substantial.

What is crucial in keeping adult learners in the system is a broad entitlement to learning as a stepping stone to new work and career opportunities. Here, though, there have been several devils in the detail of the skills strategy. Foremost is the government’s decision to restrict severely the future benefits criteria for fee remission. Only those receiving benefits as a result of actively seeking work – Job-seekers’ Allowance and Employment Support Allowance – will in future qualify. Millions of other adults receiving other benefits, who currently get fee remission or support, will no longer do so.

The negative impact this could have on enrolment and funding streams ensured it was a hot topic in questions to John Hayes at the Association of Colleges annual conference last month. One inner-city principal said it could affect around 50 per cent of his current enrolment. The narrowly utilitarian message this will send out is depressing and at odds with the more generous philosophy of learning ministers want to associate themselves with. *Learning through Life* – the main report of the NIACE-sponsored independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning – and a host of other select committee and National Skills Forum publications have all underlined how crucial the acquisition of ‘soft’ (I prefer to call them ‘enabling’) skills is to the life chances of people. They will be crucial if we are to reach some of the Leitch goals – to which this government still signs up – critically, to filling the gap produced by the drop off in the number of younger people in the next 10 to 15 years by prioritising older learners. These are precisely the people likely to be put off by the narrowing of eligibility for fee remission.

The gap between rhetoric and reality is also shown in announcements over basic skills and numeracy and literacy. As someone once advised me – ‘always looks for the small print, even when it’s not there!’ As the *Times Education Supplement* revealed, although Vince Cable assured the AoC conference that those who left school without basic literacy and numeracy skills would have access to free training, the small print – in this case, the removal of ‘programme weighting’, the extra money to reflect the difficulty of teaching some of the most needy students – tells us that, in fact, there will be a £660 cut per student on literacy and numeracy courses, on top of the general cut in adult education of around five per cent.

## “Twenty years as an Open University course tutor taught me how important it is not to confine or stereotype adult learners or their ambitions. We have to have structures that enable and assist them but not ones that straitjacket them”

The government has been at pains to say it wants to celebrate and extend opportunities for adult apprenticeships – and accompanied it by announcing an all-age careers service. But so far there has been precious little of the vital detail as to how these are going to be achieved. How will Connexions and the Nextstep services be merged – what will the budget splits be? How ambitious will the extra adult apprenticeships prove to be, given that the previous targets were exceeded by the last government? Where are the levers to persuade public and private sectors to take on apprenticeships in a much bleaker growth climate following the Osborne Budget and the spending review? And we have yet to see much awareness among civil servants or policymakers of the importance of online information, advice and guidance, and peer-group mentoring in careers advice.

Despite the welcome continuation of support for unionlearn there remains a White-hall tendency to think of learning or the acquisition of skills as a relentlessly individual enterprise. Yet, to do that is to fall into the same mindset Scrooge was warned of by his nephew in *A Christmas Carol* – of failing to see his fellows ‘as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race

of creatures bound on other journeys.’ In abandoning top-down planning we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. With few regional or sub-regional structures to act as conduits for colleges, learning providers and others to come together, will this really produce the best deal for adult learners?

Even in a time of economic retrenchment we need to dream big dreams and think imaginatively, as the post-war Labour government did in creating the NHS. I believe the original proposals for learning accounts were valid and noble ones that need to be revisited creatively. That means going beyond virtual learning accounts with hypothetical lists of future benefits towards incentivised vehicles through which private,

public and personal contributions can be levered. What the new skills White Paper has to say about them is still too timid and skeletal. In a world where we will be looking, as *Learning Through Life* argued, at creating flexibility for systems of credit, for people as they dip in and out of work, with FE, HE and highly specialised qualifications all needing a coherent framework across ‘a new mosaic of time’ – skills or learning accounts should have a central role to play.

Twenty years as an Open University course tutor taught me how important it is not to confine or stereotype adult learners or their ambitions. We have to have structures that enable and assist them but not ones that straitjacket them. The defence of a learning that brings self-worth and fulfilment as well as specific skills is central not just to our civic society but also to future innovation and entrepreneurship. It will help us all escape the pitfalls of a cast of mind and a market-driven approach to learning that can sometimes be deeply destructive of originality and human values.

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