

# A question of priorities

The closure of university public programmes across England is a direct result of ministers' decision to withdraw funding from students studying for a qualification at a level equivalent to or lower than one they already possess. It signifies the end of lifelong learning as an object of mainstream government policy, says **IAN GROUND**

**P**oliticians are, notoriously, intensely relaxed about history. We must presume then that John Denham is unaware of the significance of the closure of public programmes, amongst many others in recent months, at Reading University. For this university was founded as an adult education 'extension college' of Oxford University in 1892: a revolution of its time. In fact, many of our universities have widening participation written in their foundations stones. The closure at Reading, and those of many others these past few weeks, marks the end of that inheritance. On top of the changes in adult further education, it signifies, in fact, the end of lifelong learning as an object of mainstream government policy.

The closure of such programmes, which have reached hundreds of thousands of people, is not another sad but inevitable casualty of the recession. The decision that led to these closures was taken well before this crisis. Nor did the closures happen because the host universities no longer value such provision. These institutions have been desperately seeking to keep the provision alive. The closures are a direct and intended result of government policy on equivalent or lower qualifications.

The decision not to fund students studying for a qualification at a level equivalent to or lower than one they already possess – the so-called ELQ rule – was announced in September 2007, without any attempt at consultation or assessment of its impact. The decision was greeted with incredulity by universities, savaged in the House of Lords and found to be unnecessary by a select committee which had looked at nearly 500 pieces of written evidence. It was attacked on blogs and in letters pages. With over 22,000 signatures, a Downing Street petition calling for its reversal was the most heavily subscribed on the site. More than 200 politicians signed an Early Day Motion rejecting it; even the Director General of the CBI was moved to protest. Now CALL, the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning, with its huge base of support, calls for the reversal of the decision in its manifesto. It was and remains, as the University and College Union's Sally Hunt has said, 'the most widely condemned

government education policy in 10 years'.

Despite all the opposition, evidence and argument, the consequences of the decision are now apparent in universities across England. Many kinds of departments are struggling with the necessities of now treating second-chance learners as if they were overseas students. But lifelong learning departments and universities specialising in part-time education are by far the worst affected. Provision is closing for tens of thousands of ordinary people and part-time colleagues with unmatched dedication to their students and subjects are, at the worst of times, losing their jobs, usually without redundancy payment.

## Endless meetings

The build-up to these sad events has seen centres and departments of lifelong learning spending endless meetings pondering the theology of ELQs. If a student picked up a sub-120 credit point qualification, would they now have 'ELQed' themselves for any further study at that level? How would we advise students not to take short courses leading to qualifications because they would then be ineligible for funding for anything else they wanted to do? What strange dystopian vision of the future 'information economy' lay behind the idea that information technology was not exempted from the rule but that the study of ornamental fish was 'strategically important' and so exempt? There was one good thing about these meetings. They always ended in laughter at the sheer surreal insanity of it all.

And then, in many universities, the accountants, as they must, did their sums. Never mind the theology or the ridicule. Time to shut up shop. So how has it happened that, on top of the already huge losses of adult learners in further education, a Labour government must celebrate as a 'policy success' the closure of successful, mass programmes of higher education for the public? The purported rationale of the decision to 'prioritise' first-time entrants was to move fractionally closer to the 50 per cent participation target, to appear to be doing something about the Leitch 'skills gap' agenda and to save £100 million. But, as the Department for Innovation, Universities and

Skills' former Director General for HE, Ruth Thompson, said, it was not really about the money – a tiny percentage of the total higher education budget and roughly equal to the total of MPs' expenses last year. The actual purpose of the ELQ decision was to be a first experimental pull of the funding levers by a new department wanting to head off in 'radical' directions. It was to 'signal a shift in emphasis' that, in future, universities would be forced to focus on vocational qualifications for first-time entrants. And everything else? The creativity and innovation of thousands of part-time tutors who were doing multi-disciplinarity and student-centered learning long before either was fashionable? The aspirations of hundreds of thousands of learners seeking to reconnect with university-level education after a lifetime of work? The enormously rich and diverse tradition of civic engagement and dissemination of research by universities through their public programmes? That, according to the Secretary of State, is 'holiday Spanish'.

Indeed, for all the talk about 'priorities' and 'tough choices', what is remarkable is the studious silence of officials on what is being lost. An issue is 'a matter of priorities' when everything on the table is recognised and valued. A choice is 'tough' when either decision involves a serious and regrettable loss. And the priorities and choices have to be separable, not interwoven with each other. But in the case of university lifelong learning for the public there has been no serious acknowledgement at all that anything of value is being sacrificed. Lifelong learners in both further education and now in higher education are depicted instead as free-loaders, barring the door to deserving young people whilst they selfishly prepare for a weekend in Barcelona. Older, economically irrelevant, they are now, from the point of view of public funding, amongst the learning dead.

Officially, the policy was sold as in line with a new theme for a new premiership: fairness. It was claimed by ministers to be just morally obvious that it was fairer to 'prioritise' first-time entrants over those wanting to study, not only, as it was disingenuously claimed, for a second degree – but for any qualification 'equal or lower' than one they already had. It



is worth looking a little more closely at this 'fairness' argument. The principle of fairness adduced is that:

It is unfair to provide public support to anyone seeking a second qualification, 'equal or lower', where (a) there exist suitably able individuals who haven't any qualification and (b) public resources are limited.

A moment's thought will reveal that since (a) and (b) have always and likely always will be true, the only conclusion to draw is that lifelong learning, which, by definition involves lateral progression, always has been, and likely always will be, intrinsically unfair.

With the ELQ decision, the Government states its belief that that publicly funded lifelong learning – having more than one chance in higher education – is a species of social injustice. Strange then, that we had a minister for lifelong learning.

Bizarre then, that lifelong learning, so understood, is part of the Bologna process to

which the UK is a signatory. Incredible then, that just as the Higher Education Funding Council for England was crunching the spreadsheets that would be Excel death warrants for university adult education departments, the Prime Minister should outline his vision of education: 'Our goal must be simultaneously to expand opportunity, not just one chance but second, third and fourth chances for people throughout their lives'.

In fact, far from being morally obvious, the principle is more likely to be thought obviously immoral. Even in its own terms, the principle deliberately sacrifices the life aspirations of one group as the means of supporting those of another. That is a principle that would be rejected as wholly wrong in other areas of public policy – for example, in health or employment legislation – but is especially objectionable as a means of securing social justice in education. The recession has made the unfairness of the decision all the more obvious. Is it really obvious that it is 'fairer' that someone in a job can get co-funded support for their re-skilling

whereas someone recently made unemployed can't? *In a recession?*

All this is quite apart from the fact that, as it seems everyone except the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills acknowledges, the effect of the ELQ policy will be to damage the opportunities for first-time entrants, and especially part-time first entrants now too, the very groups and modes of delivery that ministers want universities to address.

The faux-fairness of the decision works by the specious division of two overlapping groups of learners, one of which will eventually become the other, designating one group as the underdog and then attacking the other in order to give the impression that a non-existent injustice has been heroically overcome. It pretends, against all the evidence and against all the experience of practitioners and learners, that widening participation and university-level lifelong learning form a zero-sum game; that young learners don't also need to be lifelong learners.

The ELQ decision is not about fairness at all. Nor is it actually about money nor even, really, about first-time entrants. Perhaps it is the former Director General who has it right. Once it has been established that someone may only get funding for second HE qualifications, no matter how tiny, in subjects deemed important by Whitehall, how much easier will it be – on grounds of 'fairness' once again perhaps – to argue that first-time undergraduates too should only receive public funding for subjects deemed essential to central plans?

The closures of public programmes at Reading and other universities are historic for this reason then: they are the sign of an intended seismic shift in the nature of the relation between the state and the universities about who will decide what can be learned. In this, lifelong learning departments are just the coalface canaries.

It remains to be seen if this strategic change in the relation of the state to universities will be achieved. Some may think instead that when secretaries of state and director generals have moved on, and their latest initiative is only rather dimly remembered by the next administration, this will be their legacy: the deliberate destruction of a great civic tradition, the systematic exclusion of the public from our universities and the end of lifelong learning as an object of public policy.

And now, finally, in place of this provision that began with the revolutionary developments of the last century, and in place of the 'Learning Age' we were promised, we are offered instead a 'Learning Revolution'.

It is hard indeed to be confident of the success of a revolution that has begun with such heedless zeal for shooting revolutionaries.

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