



Photo: Sue Parkins

# Goal of a learning society as remote as ever

Adult learners look set to lose out no matter which party wins the election. As the storm clouds gather, those engaged with the sector are making the case for a radically different approach, writes  
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**T**his year has got off to a bad start for many people concerned with education and training for adults. The university sector in England has reacted with shocked surprise at news of the first cut in its teaching budgets for more than a decade whilst colleges and others funded by the Learning and Skills Council, which have faced more challenging funding arrangements for several years, are working out how to cope with reductions of between 10 and 25 per cent in their 'adult responsive' budgets. The situation may not yet be quite as stark in other parts of the UK but the trend is the same.

No matter which party wins the coming election it seems like adult learners are going to be the losers – set to face a reduced range of opportunities, higher fees and fewer concessions for those in need.

This will, of course, make it harder rather than easier to make the UK a more civilised and clever country. After more than 30 years of analysing our national shortcomings in education and training, the goal of recurrent access to learning opportunities for all remains as distant as ever. Whether the focus is on certificated skills and qualifications for the workplace or on informal learning, the words of NUS President, Wes Streeting, seem apt – the prospects look like they will be 'an extraordinary act of self-harm by the Government'.

It is especially galling that this situation results not from a lack of merit in the case for lifelong learning but is because of the arrogance, greed and irresponsibility of large financial institutions and the failure of government properly to regulate their actions. As a consequence, the next government in Westminster will be faced with a mountain of public debt. At present, government debt of £780 billion works out at around £13,000 for single every person in the UK and net borrowing will be around £3,000 per person this year and next. Clearly this cannot continue but the dominant debate appears to centre largely on how quickly and deeply to cut services and not on whether, despite the additional cost, repayment might be better spread over an extended timescale.

Many engaged with the sector remain vocal in arguing for different approaches. Last year, the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning attracted a wide range of supporters in defence of adult learning and the founding partners continue to take the campaign's work forwards: The WEA is mobilising its 80,000 members and supporters to hold open meetings on the subject with prospective parliamentary candidates (see [www.wea.org.uk/weanews/](http://www.wea.org.uk/weanews/)

[supportlearningforlife.htm](http://supportlearningforlife.htm)) and the University and College Union held a well-attended lobby of Parliament in January. Similarly, the Association of Colleges has given hard-hitting evidence to a Select Committee inquiry on FE funding.

Publicly funded learning has only ever been a part of the adult education tapestry though. Broad-based employee development initiatives continue below the media radar and often with the support of union learning representatives, in workplaces where there is recognition that education is about more than the latest Train to Gain circular. Similarly, the University of the Third Age (U3A) has asked its 200,000-plus members to ask candidates for public office at all levels whether they intend to continue with the policies for informal learning outlined in *The Learning Revolution*.

The voices of these campaigners have been joined in recent months by thoughtful papers from the centre-right of the political spectrum. Publications from the Policy Exchange and the Institute of Economic Affairs have each provided welcome endorsements for straightforward general education for adults with the former stating: 'The budget for Adult Safeguarded Learning should begin to rise year on year with inflation in order to avoid cuts to provision', and the latter making a coruscating critique of the Government's fixation on skills, saying 'the idea that the only purpose of being educated is to get richer, and that, having got richer, we should then expand education simply in order to get richer still, is both modern and very odd'.

At the moment it is hard to see many silver linings among the storm clouds but one lies in the impending demise of the Learning and Skills Council. Despite the best energy and commitment of those who served on its governing bodies and many on its staff, the LSC will not be mourned by many providers. No matter what happens in the election, its tendency towards micro-management, inherited from Training and Enterprise Councils, will not be carried forward into its successor agencies. Instead, the promise is of a new era with simplified systems and greater trust of providers. This at least holds out the prospect of a sector in which institutional and service leaders and staff might have more time to concentrate on managing teaching and learning with less time being diverted into meeting the requirements of what was, for much of its existence, the UK's largest ever quango.

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