

At last a White Paper – but is it the right paper for adult education?

Throughout the last couple of years, it is fair to say that the quantity of Commissions, papers and research on the issues of skills, Further Education and Lifelong Learning has gone through the roof. To name just some of them, fundamental reviews have been undertaken by Dame Mary Hey; Philip Augar; the Education Select Committee; The Policy Connect Skills Commission; alongside regular analysis from the Learning & Work Institute; the establishment of the Centenary Commission; and the College of the Future work. This has been alongside the great campaigning effort of the [#LoveOurColleges](#) movement.

Arguably, this has all culminated in the long awaited White Paper – *Skills for Jobs: Lifetime Learning for opportunity and growth*. It has broadly been welcomed by the sector, as it has been viewed in the light of all these policy examinations. However, for those seeking an acknowledgement of the real impact and place of lifelong learning, might there be a slight sense of being underwhelmed by it...

Don't get me wrong, it sets out some robust recommendations and provides a good framework for future consultation and development. But, looking at it through the lens of the Institutes for Adult Learning ("IALs") – a network of institutions committed to ensuring high quality learning is available to any individual whatever their age or stage in life - it misses some vital issues and leaves some other questions hanging and unanswered. Its title "Skills for Jobs" in a simple way says what's in the packet, but what about all the other important issues that Lifelong Learning addresses? Are they not important and left by the wayside or are we waiting for a later date to be addressed?

For the IALs, we have to assume that the Paper is meant for us every bit as much as for a general FE college. If you read the title alone, without examining the detail, the inclusion of 'Lifelong Learning for opportunity and growth' should speak volumes. But, is there an

immediate issue with the understanding and definition of 'Lifelong Learning' – as within this white paper, successful Lifelong Learning is shown to result in employment alone.

As many commentators have already observed, there are some really positive policy interventions within the white paper. If delivered on, they should enable society to not only benefit from learning throughout life, but be a fundamental pillar in our recovery from the Covid19 Pandemic. Throughout the white paper - and the policy thinking and interventions already announced by the government, including the *National Skills Fund*, the *Lifetime Skills Guarantee* and the *Lifetime Learning Entitlement* – the focus is rightly on the role that lifelong learning will have on our economic recovery, specifically on vocational training and links to employment. However, it would be wrong if the Government lose sight of the important role that education also plays in supporting those who require broader skill development – confidence, communication, critical thinking. All of these are hugely important in enhancing people's ability to get a job and to progress once they are in one.

In fact, it is a mistake not to talk about the links between education and mental wellbeing and the importance of community...especially in view of the current pandemic.

As the individual consultations role out from the white paper, I would hope to see the importance of health and wellbeing outcomes of learning addressed within any subsequent strategy post-Covid19. The crucial part that adult education will have to play in the long-term recovery must be recognised – as learning gives people purpose, it's a reason to get up and be excited, and to share that experience with other people brings much-needed connectedness at a time when it is all too easy to become isolated.

Equally, the link between lifelong learning, gainful employment and positive mental health is long-established. By supporting those who need to reskill to access employment, who have high levels of anxiety, depression and other forms of mental health challenges and by offering a safe and stimulating environment, we are able to play a significant role in not only economic recovery but also societal recovery.

While the delivery model of IALs may be different from the majority of FE providers – with a very broad offering to all adults not just younger ones; income generated through fees as well as public funding; smaller level of accredited provision; and delivering Levels below the government's preoccupation with Level 3 - the delivery of wider outcomes is a core part of what we do. But, it is important to keep in mind people's motivations for learning when considering outcomes. Whilst employment routes are a major factor, and something we all work hard to achieve, so are broader outcomes of learning – such as: breaking down someone's isolation through being part of a community; enabling people to develop their confidence through performing arts; and establishing mental wellbeing through creative expression. All as valid, but not referenced in the white paper.

Much is also said in the white paper, as it has been in other policy work, about the need to establish skills plans relevant to local areas. It would seem reasonable to consider how local stakeholders will organise themselves around these new Skills Plans. The starting point isn't from a blank sheet of paper though, as much has already been done through existing forums and strategies and devolved areas have made significant progress in this area already. However, might this raise a slight tension – between national policy direction, to devolved funding autonomy and local skills plans?

A strong example, I would argue, is how this is already working in London – with the London Mayor and his GLA team having consulted and developed a clear Skills for Londoners Strategy, that encompasses a lot of what is already within the white paper and more. This empowers many London providers and stakeholders to utilise funding available to realise the outcomes important to London – ensuring that clear accountability is in place, and the true value of lifelong learning is recognised. The key may therefore be to build on the best of these existing plans and not to duplicate or cut across activity.

As a group of institutions, our USP is the delivery of courses which are non-accredited and Levels 1 & 2. If there is a failing in the white paper, then it is that it doesn't focus enough on these fundamental levels which are the building blocks for so many of those who education has not delivered for earlier in their lives – indeed it tends to dismiss Level 2 qualifications as not economically valuable. There are countless examples which show our experience of students both finding that Level 1 & 2 qualifications offer direct value in their finding work and/or using them as stepping stones to higher level qualifications and work. We should want to avoid replacing the snobbery around HE versus FE with a new threshold of perceived worth between Level 3 and below.

The white paper inevitably focuses on systems and frameworks but we must never lose sight of the learner or potential learner within all of this. We applaud raising employers in the system but will any future system take the learner's point of view? Adults are grown-ups and should be treated as such and be empowered to choose their own paths through learning that is relevant to their personal journey. Additionally, where do the huge backbone of the British economy, the self-employed or the small businesses fit in?

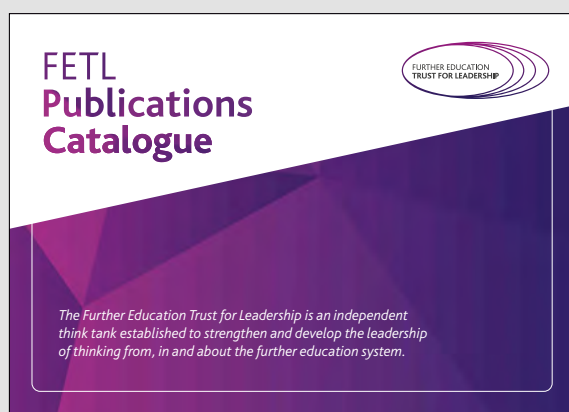
Simplifying the funding and accountability landscape should ultimately make it easier for individuals to navigate. Nobody would argue for more complexity, but for every outdated or unwanted branch of the education funding framework there are also specialist or niche components that are there for good reason. The Adult Community Learning part of AEB is one such area and its level of flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners in the system, must be embraced in any future education strategy that has 'levelling up' at its core.

And finally, autonomy. Adult learning thrives on making use of local landscape to meet the needs of communities, with no two being the same, and developing approaches with a specific community of learners in mind. Whilst I'm not sure the white paper is calling for a top down, one size fits all approach, it does suggest that there could be an overarching accountability framework within which local stakeholders can be trusted to deliver. Building on the successes of devolution to date, the government should strike a good balance.

There is much to be lauded within the white paper – and, on the whole, the sector has done that – but if we are to establish a culture of lifelong learning as part of the recovery plan from Covid19, we must maximise any government investment to ensure everyone, whatever their needs, can benefit and develop.

###

For more information on this or other FETL publications, contact: enquiries@fetl.org.uk



Available to download today

The FETL Publications Catalogue gives an overview of every work published by FETL between 2014 and 2021.

You can download it at:

fetl.org.uk/catalogue