

# Further and adult education: responding to a new economic and social climate

The collapse of the global financial markets has already brought about an unprecedented rethinking by politicians and economists about how we run our society.

The free market has been put to the test and found to be severely wanting.

No one knows exactly how the collapse of the financial markets will affect the communities we serve but a period of mass unemployment with deep social problems is certain.

John Denham, Secretary of State for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, made a plea to college principals at this year's AoC conference to help 'fight recession and provide for its inevitable casualties, the unemployed'. UCU agrees this must be our prime objective.

Unfortunately, further and adult education, due to inadequate funding, the way funds are distributed and the government's emphasis on skills and accreditation, is not in a position to be able to respond to a new period of mass unemployment.



**UCU**

University and College Union

## Leitch, skills and the machinery of government proposals

The Leitch review underpinned the new government proposals. It argued that Britain lags behind other major competing nations in terms of skilled citizens; that if the education system did not significantly attempt to up skill its workforce, then the nation's global competitiveness would be undermined; and that to urgently fill the skills shortages that exist, colleges should implement an employer-led strategy.

The government education departments came up with a three-pronged approach to make further and adult education more responsive to the skills shortage identified by Leitch:

■ **Raising expectations – 14-19 strategy** Bring about more partnerships between schools and colleges. Using the new special diplomas and apprenticeships to make the sectors work more closely, as well as tying workplaces closer to the education sector.

■ **Train 2 gain (T2G)** Promote workplace-training programmes and 'employer responsiveness.' T2G funding is accessed by colleges bidding for contracts from the Learning Skills Council (LSC) to work with employers often on their premises.

■ **Machinery of government changes** Two new education departments; Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (Adult Education colleges) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (14-16 FE provision alongside Sixth Form Centres). By 2013, 14-19 provision funding and commissioning will be back under local authority control alongside sixth form colleges. Adult learning will be separated off and between 60/65% of its funding by 2012 will come from T2G and other private sources. The LSC will be disbanded and a Skills Funding Agency created.

### Why the government proposals will not work

These proposed changes will not be able to meet the challenges of a period of mass unemployment. Even before the onset of recession, it could be argued that these changes would not help young and adult learners navigate their way round a complex and volatile world. The emphasis on shaping education around employer need has led to a narrow skills approach and an obsession with accreditation, leaving learners with a much narrower range of employment opportunities.

Now that unemployed figures are soaring, the government's proposals are looking even more inadequate. The canvas on which Leitch painted his employer-led vision for further and adult education has changed dramatically.

The revealing conclusions of the recent DIUS select committee report into reskilling said that many of Leitch's recommendations cannot be implemented and stated: 'It may well be the case that increased skills lead to an increase in national prosperity but there is a surprising lack of evidence to support the conclusion.'

As for looking to employers to seriously fund the training of their workforces, we can see by the £160 million underspend of T2G (which then was given to higher education rather than put back into adult education) that this is very unlikely to happen. Again, this was before the recession took off and as we go deeper into one, the likelihood of employers providing any significant funding for training looks even more remote.

### The breakup of further and adult education

The machinery of government proposals could well lead to the break up of further and adult education, endangering the unique role that our sector plays in providing a second chance for millions of people. The government plans to raise the learning age to 18. FE colleges teach more 16-19 year olds than any other sector. Where will these students now go? Local authorities could prepare for this by creating new SFCs to attract new funding. If this happens in your area, as competition is generated instead of co-operation and rational planning, what will happen to your 16-19 provision?

If local authorities in your area do not build new SFC centres, your 16-19 provision will become connected to local authorities, alongside schools and academies. Local management of schools still leaves a degree of co-ordination, strategic overseeing and day-to-day managerial oversight in the hands of local authorities. Colleges will remain independent corporations. Rational co-ordination and planning to meet students' needs and aspirations will be undermined by narrow interests and competitive pressures. On top of these problems, in FE we will no longer be teaching 16-19 year olds who have chosen to be there but those who are legally obliged to attend.

UCU has always opposed compulsion. We believe that forc-

ing young people to stay on in education will undermine the ethos of FE. It will not create a new generation of people who will become more educated and better prepared for whatever life throws at them. Young people need to be encouraged and inspired to learn, they cannot be coerced. Any attempts to force education upon teenagers or adults will be in danger of deepening their sense of alienation.

Our sector has been successful at providing education and training because of the commitment of its staff and an ethos which is focused on support for students voluntarily enrolled in a process of learning and personal development. We work in a sector that understands these students' anxieties about life and learning. Millions gain their 16-18 qualifications in our sector. A huge proportion for one reason or another did not achieve the qualifications to gain a better life for themselves and their families first time round. F/A education colleges offer a second chance with 44% of university students coming from the college sector.

UCU has long campaigned for F/A education colleges to be brought back under local authority (LA) control. UCU believes that, despite all their weaknesses, LA control would give back to F/AE providers and learners some democratic accountability.

However, these proposals do not seek to do that. Only commissioning and funding of one part of the sector will come through LAs. Governance will remain in the hands of increasingly out-of-touch undemocratic governing bodies. Adult education will be severed from the rest of the sector and forced to shrink its curriculum offer; courses will only be funded if they provide the narrow skills acceptable to employers.

UCU will continue to campaign for colleges to come back under LA control but it does not support the break up of funding streams for F/AE and the threat that this poses for the future of its cohesion.

### **The market and competition**

At the heart of what straightjackets the sector from being able to meet the needs of all its learners are the market mechanisms and competition that have been brought into the sector since incorporation in 1993.

Despite the talk of putting the student at the centre of college life, the attempt to compete for funding means that real choice is denied as colleges serve up a menu based upon the cheapest ingredients and the quickest and most underhand ways of ensuring that their neighbouring college is put



out of business.

The government point to their new 14-19 strategy as a model of a more joined up education system; encouraging partnerships with schools, colleges and universities and workplaces. UCU welcomes any attempt to bring about a more joined-up education system.

However, this unfortunately is not an example of one. In fact rather than decreasing competition between schools and colleges (and between colleges) the market is being rolled out further into education.

The growth of academies and the scramble to re-brand schools and colleges as SFC are just two examples. As long as the government dance around this issue, the creation of an education system that is genuinely responsive to the needs of our communities will remain a distant aspiration.

### **UCU's alternative**

At the macroeconomic level (ie governmental level), in the face of the biggest economic collapse arguably since the 1930s, the government has moved away from 30 years of free market dogma. However, at the microeconomic level (ie college level) the privatisers and the rigours of the market still drive the sector.

UCU calls upon the government as a matter of urgency to review its proposals in light of the changed economic environment. We submit the following proposals:

### **Funding**

The government claims that it is putting money into FE, but despite repeated pledges to match funding with schools, the funding gap between schools and colleges remains as high as ever. When extra funds do come into the FE 'pot' it's often not enough to keep up with inflation, and strings and targets usually make forward planning impossible. We propose that:

- *funding per student to match that in schools*
- *there should be clear funding commitments to further education provision over a 10-year period, not the stop-start approach currently adopted*



- national government should place all funding bodies back under the democratic control of local authorities/regional bodies.
- reverse the cuts in adult learning
- adult learning to be given equal funding status with other provision
- asylum seekers to be given the right to free education
- use funding as a positive action strategy to enable individuals from under-represented groups to attend.

### Planning

Colleges need to work, alongside all education sectors – nursery, school and universities - within a strategic plan, which meets the needs of the whole community. We propose:

- the F/A education sector to be brought back under the democratic control of local authority /regional bodies
- to bring further and adult education back together into the same government department
- city/town wide cross-sector education forums with representatives from local unions, parents groups, student unions, community leaders and employers; their role would be to map out the educational needs of the community and to develop a joint education sector plan.

### Colleges for the community

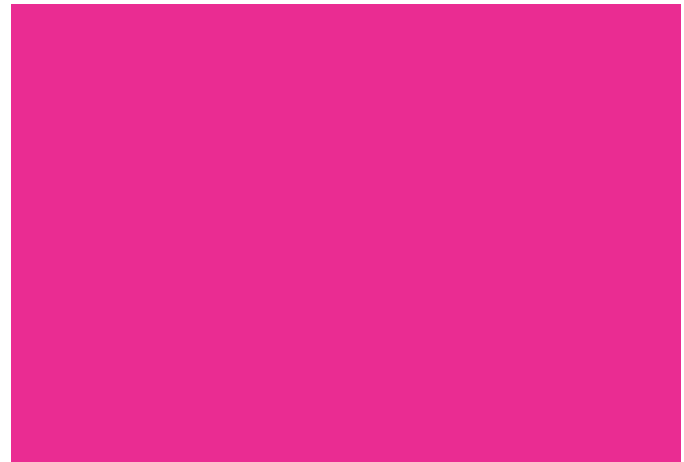
We believe that colleges must be responsive to all those who live and work in a local community: pensioners, young adults, cultural groups, families and local employers. The following steps need to be taken to re-engage the community with our colleges:

- hold regular feedback forums and outreach with local groups to explore the real educational needs of all those in the community
- ensure that employers take the educational needs of their employees seriously: employees should be given a statutory right to paid educational leave and to workplace training committees, and trade unions must be given negotiating rights for education and training.

### A broad curriculum

We in the F/A education sector have a proud history of teaching and preparing young adults for employment as well as providing a wide range of opportunities for academic study.

However, the government's narrow skills agenda has encouraged college management to close their GCSE and A level humanities as they chase new funding streams linked to



T2G. This policy has also led to the narrowing and forced mechanistic approach to vocational skills teaching, and the knowledge that underpins it. The point of vocational education is to ensure that students are not disadvantaged in pursuit of whatever career or educational pathway they wish to pursue. Vocational education and training should be based on an occupational basis as opposed to 'skill' or 'task-based'. We propose:

- strategies to re-build the professional standing of teachers in the sector
- an extension to the Apprenticeship training should be sought, where a broad work-based programme is offered
- wider learning experiences should always be an integral part of a vocational curriculum; our students need to learn about their rights, the role of trade unions, citizenship, discrimination, participating in democracy and environmental issues
- establish democratic control of awarding bodies.

### Campaigning suggestions

UCU believes that together we can campaign and create a sector that can rise to the expectations of our learners and prepare them for the difficult times that many will face in the future:

- organise a training day/workshop in your region inviting all reps to come along; use this briefing document as a frame to open up a debate on how we can campaign around these issues
- organise a meeting in your college around the theme **'Further and Adult Education : responding to a new economic and social climate'**
- invite national UCU speakers and/or your local NEC member into your college to lead off a discussion on the issues raised in this paper
- organise with local community groups a meeting to launch a local Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning (CALL)
- link up with local NUT, NASUWT and UNISON branches/regions to discuss joint campaigning opportunities.