

## **National Skills Fund Consultation, September 2021 – UCU Response**

### **Free level 3 qualifications for adults**

There are significant financial and personal barriers that adults can face. There isn't enough easily accessible information for adults about how they might begin to fit learning into their lives, nor about the financial support that is available to help. The amount of financial assistance also isn't sufficient for many people to take up learning, and eligibility criteria are too narrow to enable people to benefit. If they are in work, their employer may not allow the flexibility they need to successfully complete their learning. Support services have been cut, so adults with additional learning needs may not be able to access the support they require to facilitate their participation. So there is a role for both increasing the amount of financial and additional support available to adult learners, and increasing the flexibility of courses.

Under current rules, adults are prevented from using the free level 3 entitlement if they already have a level 3, and can only choose from a limited range of courses. UCU would suggest that an easy way to remove these barriers to learning is to widen the eligibility criteria so that the existing qualification level held does not impact access to the entitlement, as many people will want to retrain in a different area to their existing qualification anyway, and to expand the range of funded courses to preferably all level 3 courses qualifying for public funding rather than a centrally prescribed narrow list of courses.

However the question is also missing a more fundamental point. The most significant barrier to taking up a level 3 qualification is not having a level 2, or the skills to enable a successful transition to level 3. By boosting skills at lower levels through greater investment and encouraging a culture of lifelong learning through social partnership, backed up by a universal information, advice and guidance service, we can enable many more adults to achieve at level 3.

There isn't an easily accessible, comprehensive information source for adults. Because a lot of financial support for adults depends upon providers setting their own criteria and distributing funds, it is not easy for people to find out what they would be entitled to, and whether they would definitely receive the funds. Adults are in need of a free, universal entitlement to learning, and the available support for extra costs should be clearly laid out and easy to understand. An information, advice and guidance service that makes the most of technology blended with a personalised service should be available to all.

Although the new entitlement to level 3 is well known within the sector, there appears to be limited knowledge about the offer on a wider basis. This is partly because of the lack of advice referenced above, but also the lack of publicising the offer to adults. Perhaps a central marketing campaign would help.

Employers can make use of union learning reps (ULRs) to champion training and development within their organisations. They can engage learners that are otherwise hard for providers to reach. ULRs offer ongoing support and guidance to learners throughout their learning journey, offering information, advice, guidance, carry out initial assessments of skills, link learners up with providers, help arrange flexible provision for shift workers, and plan next learning steps.

By widening the scope of the national skills fund to invest and support lower levels of learning, adults can use this as a stepping stone to eventually achieving a level 3. The 2018 Union Learner Survey revealed that the more learning episodes a learner undertakes, the more likely they are to gain a qualification and a greater range of softer outcomes. This underlines the continual need for support to bring about a 'learner journey' in individual lives.

It is important to recognise that over six million working adults are not qualified to level 2. Lower qualifications often equate to lower pay and increased job precarity. Level 2 is therefore an essential progression step for people upskilling in employment. Personal, social and employability skills are also a key part of engaging learners. If a learner has limited or no prior qualifications, courses in these subjects will increase the learner's self-esteem and help make them more employable. For those who have been demotivated or alienated by previous learning experiences these courses offer an opportunity to re-engage with education. They also help when looking for employment as employers can see that learners have the commitment to complete a learning programme.

The national skills fund consultation does not consider the role of ESOL, a distinct area of adult education provision. ESOL is crucial for protecting, promoting and developing language provision for migrant and language minority communities. Providers report demand for ESOL far exceeds what they can offer. By supporting ESOL provision we can also enable more adults on the pathway to level 3 qualifications.

### **Meeting critical skills needs**

UCU does not believe that we can resolve critical skills shortages by focussing solely on identifying gaps. We need a holistic strategy which places further and adult education at the centre of social and economic recovery from the covid-19 pandemic. We should look to provide broad educational opportunities that meet the needs of individuals and communities under a cross-sectoral strategic plan. By working together collaboratively, lives could be transformed, and further education could help to drive forward the much needed economic recovery.

It is important that flexible provision is funded to allow adults in employment to fit their study around their work and personal responsibilities. This means funding bite sized units of learning that can add up to a full qualification but with no requirement to do so and no time cap on completion.

Breaking down learning into manageable steps is also important as one size doesn't fit all. Learners are motivated by qualification steps, as they can understand where they are at and measure their progress.

The national skills fund does not address the recruitment and retention crisis in the FE sector, does not increase the funding rate, does not address structural disadvantages and inequalities and does not link to the government's net zero commitment. We are not going to meet critical skills needs if we do not tackle all these areas in a joined up way.