

Response from UCU to *Skills and Employment in London: London and Skills Employment Board's Strategy*

Introduction

UCU - the University and College Union – represents 14,000 members working in the further education (FE) sector in colleges, adult and prison education services and in the higher education (HE) sector in pre- and post-92 universities in the London region. This response draws on the union's policies developed in response to central government policies set by various skills white papers and the Leitch Report as well as the consultations conducted specifically on the strategy.

This strategy will impact greatly on UCU members, and they will be crucial to the success of its delivery through high quality learning programmes and commitment to the main objectives.

UCU welcomes the opportunity to respond and looks forward to being fully involved in playing a full role in the further development of the strategy when it is implemented.

Overview

London is the only part of England where there is an element of democratic input and accountability in learning and skills policy and UCU strongly supported the moves to introduce this. While we have some strong reservations about certain aspects of this strategy, we recognise that it is the product of the first extension of learning and skills policy back to at least some form of democratic accountability.

We recognise that the strategy is better than the Leitch Report proposals and the government's proposals for implementing Leitch. It has firm and largely practical proposals that go beyond the rhetoric and exhortation that characterises so much of government policies. As is increasingly clear, there is a great deal happening or about to happen in relation to the whole range of FE activities and institutions themselves. Although UCU policies in relation to this at national level are still being formulated, it is clear that these will include calls for the return of FE to 'local' democratic control and accountability

whether local is defined as regional, subregional or local authority. London's experiences of ILEA and the GLC gives strong and positive examples of how this has worked in the past.

The main concerns for UCU are:

- The continuing adherence to voluntarism in skills policy: of course this falls outside the remit of the Mayor and London government; nonetheless there is a curious absence of proposals to use contract compliance in an active and positive way.
- The belief in the positive impact of competition between providers and the opening up of provision to new providers as a way of introducing innovation and quality to skills development.
- The continuing reliance on employers and emphasis on employer needs: UCU has always advocated the use of 'employment needs which would acknowledge the needs of employees as well as employers, and the need for perspectives that are more long term, national and regional than those of many employers.
- Government definitions of 'demand-led': these are often narrow and simply mean what the government will fund; when defined in terms of employers and individuals, no collective needs are included.
- While there are clear references to social inclusion and communities in the strategy, few of these make positive use of forms of collective organisation in the various activities.
- There are no major reference to demography. Nationally, numbers of 16-19s will start to fall 2009. If the trend is the same for London then this could mean threats and/or opportunities: opportunities in terms of potential reduction in costs of education and training of young people with potentially consequential increases in funding for adults, and threats in terms of a much tighter labour market for young people with organisations possibly having to compete fiercely to attract sufficient young recruits.

There are some policy initiatives/proposals/consultations that require response, which had not been announced when the strategy was written:

- The government's 14-19 proposals to shift the strategic leadership to local authorities in 2010. There are references as well as clear questions in the strategy to this but there could be a greater force to the arguments and proposals to give a regional perspective to 14-19, given the potential fragmentation of delivery with 32 London boroughs and the relative ease of transport (home to study routes) for young people which leads now to huge migration of young people in and out of their home boroughs. There is also little reference to the government's proposals to raise the compulsory learning age to 18.
- The new ESOL proposals which are being consulted on and were published on 2 January 2008. These propose local government co-ordination, planning and prioritisation of ESOL provision and funding to support the most disadvantaged and settled communities and community cohesion.

Challenges (from executive summary)

The strategy sets out five challenges for action:

Question 1: are these the right challenges for action? If not what key things are the most important to improve Londoners' employment and skills

Generally we would agree with the challenges identified but have strong reservations with Challenge 2: we would certainly want to see this expressed as 'employment' programme so that it involves unions and communities. Workforce development must be a partnership between employee/unions and employers rather than just handing over to employers. Of course if employers are going to largely pay for their workforce development which we would want to see, they are going to need to have a say in it at the very least.

In Challenge 3 we are opposed to the opening up of markets. It is our view that this would lead to instability, unnecessary expenditure and wasteful duplication. We doubt the board will fulfil its strategy by relying on market mechanisms and more competition. We believe it would be far better to invest in improving existing providers because there is an existing infra structure to build on. We would argue that the colleges (and universities) have proved themselves to be both innovative and flexible not least in meeting all the twists, turns and changes of government policies in this area. Central planning on a regional basis is more likely to help realise the board's goals. A bit more stability and consolidation would help them be more innovative. We would also support and probably press even further on pre and post-16 links, and the fair share of the public investment cake.

Chapter 1: Introduction

General comments

- We agree with the analysis of skills issues in London and the distinctiveness of London's labour market
- We agree with the identification of London problems, especially the appalling record on worklessness (higher than national), child poverty and position of disadvantaged groups – BME, women and disabled. We fully agree that equality has to be at heart of the strategy
- We recognise the unique position of the Employment Board.
- We support the Mayor's vision.
- We agree that change is needed. However, while this may need to be radical we are concerned that this should not de stabilise the sector which has undergone radical changes year on year for the last 15 years or so
- We would want to see employer needs redefined as 'employment' needs, thus recognising that employees have needs equally as important as employer needs. Such a formulation would encompass more long term and national regional and local

perspectives than employer perspectives which are understandably focused on shorter term profit.

- Refugee integration strategy: we agree that London needs to make use of economic potential of all refugees. Refugees also have more implicit benefits in terms of adding to diversity of London which helps in terms of its global position.
- UCU's policy on Leitch is that we agree with the analysis, support some proposals such as universal adult careers service, but reject continuing reliance on voluntarism. We have great scepticism on the belief that relying on employers is the solution and we are opposed to government's definition of demand-led and moves to increase competition among providers and privatisation of public sector provision

Chapter 2 Board's ambition

Question 2: agreement with Board's ambitions? Are these the right supporting targets and if not what alternatives?

Generally UCU agrees with these. However, while we recognise and agree with the statement to target the needs of the most disadvantaged, we would position this alongside the need for a well rounded provision.

Overall we agree they are and welcome the fact that there will be small numbers. but we would like to see a greater involvement of the teachers and trainers in the process.

Chapter 3: supporting London's people

We support the board's approach to adapt government reforms of skills and welfare to meet London needs and for the integration with 14-19 IAG and for this to have a London wide perspective and links support workers (like ULRs – again strong support for this).

We acknowledge the key intervention made by the Mayor in 2007 in providing funds to redress the proposed cuts to the ESOL programme across London and recognise that this has also been acknowledged by the government in that at least part of the Government's proposals is to make local authorities identify the local priorities.

Offender learning: this fails to identify that in current government policies around prison/offender education, with proposed links between prisons and local LSC, are inadequate for London where most London offenders especially those serving medium to long sentences are dispersed around the country. There may be similar problems for young offenders and women – given high percentages of BME prisoners there are major equal opportunities issues here as well

Priority 4 helping employers and providers join forces to develop good quality programmes to ensure employability and advancement

Action 4.1 We would of course challenge the notion that it should be led by employers and implicitly without any employee/union involvement.

Action 4.2: more work based learning and skills development including much better promotion of apprenticeships The strategy does acknowledge the key role unions play in apprenticeships and work place learning. (we have called for more mechanisms within the workplace to be levers for work place learning and link sector strategies with actual action on the ground, and give an active role to unions – ULRs, learning agreements and learning committees – nationally we call for legislation – in the London context we would want to see this as part of measures and activities which could be part of contract compliance)

Question 3: do you agree with the priorities and actions for chapter and services available to individuals to improve their skills and employment opportunities? What further priorities and actions?

Integrated employment and skills services and better IAG with a London-wide service clearly make a lot of sense. Any adult IAG needs to marry up with those for young people, but the board can give this coherence and consistency. While accepting the need for better employability training we would argue that this should not be at the expense of knowledge based programmes and general education especially for those denied/failed previously especially as these can have precisely the soft skills that employers say they actually want.

This section clearly acknowledges the role and importance of trades unions and we would commend that a contracts compliance approach be adopted where unions would be better able to support the initiatives, where the issues of time off for ULRs. Learning agreements and Committees can be properly made to work.

Chapter 4: Role of employers

Question 4: do you agree with the priorities and actions for involving employers in London employment and skills challenges? What further priorities and actions?

Of course employers, as suppliers of jobs need to be part of the Strategy, especially as one of the ongoing problems is ensuring that Londoners get London jobs. But successful economies especially those with good skills development usually base this on social partnership in that it is both employer and employee needs that must be met. Unions have a key role to play here and should be fully involved. We do not believe that ‘voluntarism’ is a good enough approach. Indeed we believe that as with other recommendations/action points the board should consider a contract compliance approach so that employers can see that this is not just about paying lip service to the schemes but that unless they actually do deliver on training they may not have access to publicly funded contracts such as the Olympics, Crossrail etc.

We do have some concerns about the capacity of SSCs to meet what they are being asked to do and also how little they are social partnership organisations with a very minor role for unions in them.

Chapter 5 An education and skills system for the future

UCU supports the case outlined in the strategy for the board's brief to include young people. We largely support the statements around young people although we have some additional points as to why London's young people's aspirations and attainment are low e.g. racism attitude of employers, meeting challenges of London's incredible diversity not properly funded. We would question what might turn out to be a fairly impoverished London curriculum built around employability and skills which While not saying are not important, London young people need far more including general education and citizenship.

Our difficulties with this section are around the proposed actions.

We welcome the appreciation of FE staff and the way colleges responded to the various government policies. But we have to highlight the ongoing democratic deficit in FE since incorporation, and see the changes to involve London government in learning and skills as a step in the right direction. However, the moves to self-regulation in FE will need to be considered carefully especially the interface with existing regulation and accountability in local/regional government.

In answer to implicit criticism about colleges involvement in pre-employment training and on full qualifications: it must be recognised that partly this is as a result of the drivers of FE especially the funding methodologies. There is a need to recognise that full qualifications often benefit learners because these are much more transportable and transferable than employer-approved and promoted bits of courses which may be only useful with that employer. The idea of London colleges collectively developing change management programmes for remodelling the sector is something worth considering but that would have to be alongside what might be a London-wide contract, as FE is going to face its own recruitment problems. This will be especially critical in London given the rates of pay and conditions; there is a need for these to be tackled on a regional basis.

On the key remodelling elements there is a need for realism and amendment:

Deeper engagement with employers We are not denying the crucial role of employers or employment; qualifications related to the labour market is what most students there for. But it also needs to be recognised that employers' needs can be short-sighted, narrow and short term. So we would say there must be something over and above employer needs that is about wider national/regional/local perspectives and needs. Deeper involvement with employers needs to go alongside at the very least continuing and deepening involvement with communities.

Personalised curriculum There is a need to separate the rhetoric with the reality of what can actually be achieved when so much of FE curriculum is externally derived and regulated

E-learning We accept the benefits but this is not a panacea: real learning takes place between human beings and through human inter-action. New technology can be valuable teaching and learning tool for many but also can be yet another barrier to learning for some.

Greater specialisation Yes, but within a comprehensive curriculum offer. Greater specialisation throws up real quality and access issues and this needs to be looked at very carefully. There is precedent that mainly in inner London there has always been specialisation among Colleges – there is good practice to learn from.

Supporting FE workforce and leaders UCU would support this but it would have to be FE pay and conditions to go alongside this.

Action 1.2. improved employer involvement in higher skills delivery UCU could not support co-funding tuition fees. It seems that not much thought has been given to the unparalleled HE provision that London has – such as the full range of old and new HE, research and teaching, well established links with national as well as regional employment sectors. London FE and HE pioneered many of the current initiatives such as Open College Networks, Access courses etc.

Governance We submit that institutions should be much more accountable to the communities they serve and there is a need to explore new ways for this too.

Opening up publicly funded learning and skills market UCU is opposed to this. This does not lead to stimulation but is wasteful competition. It is far better to support what is there especially as it isn't broken. As has been pointed out already and recognised colleges have responded and shown flexibility While operating under funding methodologies which have restricted them. We are not aware of 'failing' London colleges, and believe that if this strategy is to work then FE needs all the support available through adequate funding for staff and equipment to be able to deliver. Marketisation affects and destabilises staff. UCU largely supports the approach advocated by the board and would like to see a more supportive attitude to FE. Again we would strongly advocate a contract compliance approach whereby colleges would be asked to ensure they are implementing nationally agreed pay and conditions for staff, that they are not abusing the use of part-time and - fixed-term contract staff and are themselves signing up to training and upskilling their own staff.

Chapter 6 Integrating employment and skills delivery

Question 6: do you agree with the priorities and actions for integrating employment and skills delivery systems? Further priorities and actions?

We certainly see merit in having in place a strong planning role that connects with what is beginning to happen certainly at local authority level and the idea of more integration of services and joint commissioning, programming and investment would appear to have merit.

Chapter 7 making the public sector system work for London

Question 7: support for priorities and action for making the public sector system work for London? Further actions and priorities?

We support greater co ordination of regional strategy and public funding While recognising that regional needs and national priorities will at times differ. The Mayor has already demonstrated how this can be achieved when funding was secured for ESOL last year.