

**Educational
Centres
Association**



**Skills for Sustainable Growth
BIS Consultation Response**

October 2010

Skills for Sustainable Growth response form

If you are unable to use the online comments boxes to record your responses, please complete the questionnaire below and send it to:

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The Department may, in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, make individual responses available on public request.

The closing date for this consultation is 14 October 2010.

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Please tick the option below which best describes on whose behalf you are responding:

<input type="checkbox"/>	General Further Education College
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sixth Form College
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Charity or social enterprise
<input type="checkbox"/>	Training Organisation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Government
<input type="checkbox"/>	Individual
<input type="checkbox"/>	Large employer (250+)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medium employer (50 to 250 staff)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Small employer (10 to 49 staff)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Micro employer (up to 9 staff)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Trade union or staff association
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please describe):

The Educational Centres Association (ECA), which takes a wide view of individual learning needs and expectations, welcomes this consultation.

Since 1920 the Association has played an enduring and active role in promoting and supporting adult community learning that relates to overall sustainability in communities. It therefore prefaces its remarks by saying the document appears blind to the realities within which the Strategy for Sustainable Growth has been framed, whether with adult community learning or the vocational skills agenda in mind.

We agree with Climate Change Minister, Greg Barker (Guardian 13.10.10) that “the low carbon model isn’t just good business for a small specialist sector. It is something the whole economy has to embrace to remain globally competitive.” We would therefore have expected more emphasis in the BIS consultation on low impact technologies, local delivery systems and raising levels of environmental awareness, as well as this orientation towards a changed agenda finding clearer expression.

Nor is there evidence that the Strategy is seen to complement the Government’s commitment to the National Health Service, where the Department’s own Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing shows that the integration of health care with other public services, including adult learning, is critical to their success.

In the introduction to the document stress is placed on the need to respond to the deficit reduction and the need to focus on the greatest social and economic benefits for employers and individuals. It does this without putting these into the wider contexts for sustainability that relate to resource depletion and environmental impact, which will be enduring challenges well beyond the period of the deficit reduction. Moreover we face a future in which demographically the whole UK population will on average be older than ever before and the government is already demanding a longer working life. If this period is seen as an opportunity to deal with the challenge of doing more with less then the lessons learned should last through and beyond the period of deficit reduction.

Although this consultation has a focus on the future of the skills agenda it contains no sense of foresight as to the future role of the UK in the global economy to guide the sector during the present period of constraint. We believe that it is critical that this period is used to prepare for a redefined future. The proposed strategy takes no account of the inevitable structural changes in employment, such as the rising demand for those skills needed in a ‘green technology’ jobs market.

The deficit reduction strategy will also mean that change is real in peoples’ lives. The strategy gives too little recognition of this and fails to note the past experience e.g. with the REPLAN programme during the 1980’s downturn, where Adult Community Learning (ACL) played a major role in sustaining and reorienting local communities. To quote ECA Member LSEN Manchester: -

“It is well documented in research that the most stressful part of anyone’s life revolves around transition – from school to college, from work to redundancy, from health into sickness; consequently a future skills strategy should focus on identifying and supporting [a] skill strategy that encompasses a wide range of learning opportunities from the informal to the formal that will provide individuals and communities with the resilience needed for the future.” To this we would add the clear view expressed by former DEFRA Ministers after the catastrophic West Midland flooding, that without the resilience arising from community learning strategies developed by the third sector and which anticipate and train for civil emergencies, the UK will render itself incapable of dealing with the anticipated future impacts of climate change.

We have welcomed the close attention of the present Secretary of State and the Minister to ACL and are pleased to see that in the consultation Foreword John Hayes says: -

“Only by seeing learning as a single whole, not a series of separate compartments, can we ensure that it takes its place at the heart of both business strategy and community life. ... I believe that we can deliver more and save money. But we will only achieve cost effectiveness by challenging the orthodox assumptions about what skills are for, how they are funded and what role Government should play... By acknowledging the value of learning we can begin the task of re-evaluating our priorities, rediscovering craft, redefining community learning, rejuvenating apprenticeships, rebalancing the economy and building a big society”.

The ECA understands these vitally important points but feels the document fails both in individual paragraphs and in its totality to realise the breadth and depth of the Ministers' vision and regrets that these proposals fail to state that the funding relationship with accredited skills is out of balance with their aspirations. In our experience ACL can be seen as a highly efficient, flexible and entrepreneurial part of the education system, characterised by the commitment and dedication of the staff who work in it, yet despite this is little recognised and under-valued. We are concerned that the narrow, employer-driven interpretation of skills adopted by the Leitch Review has led to cuts in funding and support for adult and community learning by subsidising training that would otherwise be funded by employers themselves. In contrast the sector operates consistently with the earlier remit, 'to put the learner at the heart of everything we do'.

We know that Ministers agree that some of the added value and most empowering results of informal learning are the soft outcomes (self esteem, confidence and resilience) needed to find employment, be more productive in the work place, maintain physical and mental health and become better engaged in the community (much needed and particularly apparent in disadvantage groups).

In our view the Department should therefore redirect subsidies for training and vocational courses away from employers in order to increase spending on other aspects of learning. Such business costs should be treated as normal operating expenses like machine tools, office equipment or health and safety. This would take account of structural changes in the labour market, as well as recognising the value to individuals and the community in terms of enhancing the quality of life and well-being of society, which in themselves have a direct impact economically.

We acknowledge that Government Departments other than BIS have in the past been innovative and supportive of adult community-based learning. However, funding from those other Departments has often lacked the infrastructure and support available to more traditional adult education providers nor has Government combated the silo effects of this piecemeal funding which if better connected could undoubtedly be more supportive of the overtly economic skills agenda. The present consultation fails to address this structural problem

The ECA agrees with Ministers that all aspects of provision should be built around engaging with learners and potential learners, predominantly within their own communities. This engagement process should inform what provision is needed and where; ensuring that funds are directed appropriately into areas of need and demand. In this respect we agree with the WEA perspective; namely that “Funding simplification must not impact unequally on the most disadvantaged adults. Learners on income related benefits and those studying certain literacy and numeracy programmes should continue to be fully funded in a system that is simple but also clear about priorities.”

We believe BIS should aim to increase public, private and personal spending on adult learning by encouraging local and national Learning Promoters and providers to be entrepreneurial, imaginative, collaborative and innovative in making learning desirable and inclusive. To again agree with the WEA, that where “The consultation talks about

'local leadership' [there should be] - a broad guiding coalition engaging local authorities, employers, colleges and universities, civil society organisations and others. This should pool resources and avoid duplication. However a culture of trust and co-operation will depend upon a clear distinction between commissioning and providing roles."

However to merely state these objectives without a commensurate plan for action is empty rhetoric. Without clearly planned staff development strategies, as proposed by LLUK, the Lifelong Learning sector will be incapable of realising the goals set out. There can be no doubt that a 'spend to save' approach must be adopted and that capacity building for staff in the sector, as well as building on leadership development in communities, are critical to any success in responding to the challenge from Ministers.

We reiterate that this period of constraint is an opportunity to reshape the post school sector and it is our view that the present document neither grasps the nature of this time of change nor addresses the Government's aspirations with respect to the Big Society.

We give below selective responses to the questions which were formally asked.

3. In view of the current fiscal deficit, what areas of public investment in skills could be reduced and where could private investment be increased? What are the main constraints on changing the balance between public and private investment and how could these be overcome?

As we said in our opening statement the Department should **redirect subsidies from training and vocational** courses for employers, which should be normal business expenses like machine tools, office equipment or health and safety, in order to increase spending on re-skilling and self-directed learning. This should take account of structural changes in the labour market, the unwillingness of employers to fund training for those who are disengaged from the labour markets and recognise the value to individuals and the community in terms of enhancing the quality of life and well-being of society which in themselves have a direct impact economically.

We acknowledge that Government Departments other than BIS have in the past been innovative and supportive of adult community-based learning. However, funding from other Departments has often lacked the infrastructure and support available to more traditional adult education providers nor has Government combated the silo effects of this piecemeal funding which if better connected could undoubtedly be more supportive of the overtly economic skills agenda.

7. How should we ensure that training leads to real gains in skills, knowledge and competence and not just the accreditation of existing skills?

While this may appear a laudable objective the government should in fact encourage and enable accreditation of competences developed in the workplace as the basis for cost reduction. This question as posed is based on the false premise that the accreditation of existing skills is an unproductive exercise. There is ample evidence that without benchmarking of current skills, knowledge and competences there are real and substantial economic and opportunity costs that arise from 're-teaching'. Also learners who have their full range of competences recognised have greater mobility in the labour market and have greater potential to advance to higher levels of training. We believe it would be regressive to impose the suggested constraints in this area which would exacerbate present structural problems.

8. How can we incentivise colleges and training organisations to offer a flexible and cost-effective 'needs-led' offer for people who are out of work or at risk of becoming unemployed?

Funding might be routed through brokerage agencies that would also provide Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). But this should be according to the learners' wishes rather than being imposed by the agency.

11. Should Government continue with an entitlements based approach? How can we ensure that Government money is targeted where it is needed most and where it will achieve most value?

The ECA agrees that an entitlements based approach is necessary and that this must rely on active analysis of the individual and collective needs of populations in their own areas. This implies some need for a collective approach to data gathering and dissemination if a balance of needs and expectations is to be realised. We believe local authorities are well placed to carry out the analysis and dissemination of such information and that learner and local community interests should be represented in any local arrangements that are made with respect to frameworks of entitlement.

12. How can the learning market be made to work more efficiently, effectively and economically and to be more responsive and accountable to demand by individuals and employers, while also delivering value for money?

BIS should aim to **maintain levels of public, private and personal spending** on adult learning by encouraging local and national Learning Promoters and providers to be entrepreneurial, imaginative, collaborative and innovative in making learning desirable and inclusive.

Continued support for those National Infrastructure Bodies that provide leadership and encourage learner and community engagement in the setting of strategy & goals for the sector.

We believe the following activities would help to address responsiveness, accountability and to deliver value for money: -

- Community Learning Representatives to parallel the acknowledged success of UnionLearn Representatives;
- Regular, independent **surveys & research** into adults' aspirations; participation, experience and appreciation of learning, to inform planning and provision;
- **Adult learner's voice** and representation of learners through elected class contacts and representatives of identifiable groups of learners;
- Investment in accessible **facilities for learning**;
- Systematic **feedback** from users, through on site and online feedback forms;
- Flexible staff development which recognises changes in the Lifelong Learning sector;
- Light-touch **quality assurance** standards, along the lines of matrix, for externally moderated self-assessment;
- Learner-centred self-assessment moderated by Ofsted **inspection**;
- National **learning networks** and centres of excellence to share knowledge, innovation and practice in different fields of adult and community learning (e.g. citizenship, literacy, numeracy, family learning, sustainable development, etc)

- Clear progression routes made known and available to people engaged in **any** form of learning;
- All adults should be encouraged to continue learning through a network of advice, guidance and motivation.

16. How can we improve the accessibility and quality of careers information, advice and guidance services for adults?

The ECA is particularly concerned about issues concerned with life course planning and the need for services that respond to significant life changes in an ageing population. The impact of events such as redundancy, eviction, marital breakdown or the onset of a disability or long-term illness are profound. Current arrangements for those facing this wide range of life changes take them to other advisory services which are often blind to the potential for systematic learning to help their clients resolve long-term problems. To meet such needs will require a more coherent and proactive approach to advice and guidance that can be accessed through a range of agencies including employers and community sector organisations.

18. We welcome views on approaches to informing learners and employers including how better information can be made available while reducing bureaucracy.

We are impressed by facilities and initiatives such as School of Everything that take account of learners' interests and needs as well as the more market driven approaches usually adopted by providers.

Further training and support for the wider range of advice and guidance agencies, including those giving financial advice, should be expected to signpost learning opportunities such as numeracy courses and learning resources.

20. How can we enable colleges and training organisations to be more efficient and responsive to the needs of employers, learners and their community but without adding new layers of control by local bodies?

This issue needs to be seen in the context of wider community engagement that ensures the community development aspects of adult learning achieve the greatest levels of support.

We envisage that direct election of community and learner representatives to college boards would be effective and efficient mechanisms while also reflecting the government's aspirations for the 'Big Society'.

27. How could we encourage the development of productive partnerships with third sector organisations?

Third sector organisations will be critical to the success of the 'Big Society' as many work at grassroots level within communities and often with hard to reach groups. To form productive partnerships with third sector organisations it is essential that the skills and knowledge that they bring with them are fully recognised and that they are treated as an equal player in all partnerships.

It should be recognised that there are real costs to third sector organisations in maintaining an active role in such partnerships and that these costs should be factored in to any planned developments. In particular the staff development needs in both third sector and learning provider organisations will need close attention if the aspirations that we share with government are to be realised.

28. We welcome views on new ways that colleges could be used to support the community.

While recognising that there are many colleges that successfully listen to and interact with the local community this is not necessarily true of all colleges. Engagement with grassroots groups should not take a paternalistic approach. We would suggest that if colleges are to be used to support 'the community' then they will need to draw on the expertise of those currently working within the communities such as community development workers and others engaged in community development and learning.

College staff will need to enhance their skills to more effectively listen to, communicate with and engage the community. To enhance their role in this respect will call for new approaches at middle and senior levels AND new initiatives within the community sector.

Colleges should seek to work with those based in the community to offer provision which reflects local needs and aspirations on terms that are agreed with community representatives.

In addition there should be a new mandate which would ensure that buildings constructed by or currently operated with public funds are made available for Informal Adult Learning at a fair economic price, such that it is non-profit making and in a sustainable manner.

29. How could adult and community learning be reinvigorated? We especially welcome ideas for how businesses and others could be encouraged to engage in supporting local community learning to help create local ownership and momentum.

As we say in our introductory statement we welcome the close attention of the Secretary of State and the Minister to this field of work. We have consistently advocated for learner and community engagement in the planning of provision and its monitoring and evaluation.

We believe that the Ofsted inspection mechanisms could be enhanced to give greater recognition to learner perspectives and the latter should be carried through to regular reporting at board level within all provider organisations. We understand that commercial organisations already adopt focus groups and other consumer feedback mechanisms that the sector could readily adopt at little cost.