
Lifelong learning manifesto

Making lifetime learning a reality

November 2016



University Alliance Position Paper

The challenge of enabling lifelong learning

- Working lives are getting longer and more precarious but participation in adult and part-time learning has been falling for some time.
- The Government has talked about the need to promote economic prosperity and social resilience with a government that is 'working for everyone'. Enabling access to continuing education is fundamental to this.
- To date, the education system has been designed as if transitions to work are 'quick and straight', as the 2009 NIACE Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning found.
- There are signs, however, that this may be about to change. For example, the recent publication of the Technical and Further Education Bill and the announcement of maintenance loans for part-time students suggests that the Government are thinking seriously about how to enable individuals to follow a more flexible path through education and training.
- The issues around take-up and financing of lifelong learning are complex and multi-dimensional and tackling them is no easy task. For example, lifetime learning is not confined to education but also to health and wellbeing.
- The NIACE report focused on the need to bring coherence to the education system as a whole, across the lifespan, and we also advocate for this approach.
- We suggest some practical solutions below, which, because of the complex nature of the challenge, will require a degree of piloting and refinement over time.

What has gone before?

The good:

- *Expansion of higher education and removal of student number controls.* Neither social mobility nor the maximisation of economic capacity and productivity will be fully realised in a system that restricts numbers. The removal of student number controls also created space for institutions to offer flexible, lower cost provision to non-traditional students rather than to seek to maximise profit from limited numbers.
- *Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs).* These proved successful in attracting learners including those from non-traditional groups. While they were vulnerable to fraud, and were ultimately closed, the principle of ILAs remains sound and they have been relaunched in Scotland to good effect.
- *Widening participation and supporting student success.* More recently governments have focused increasingly on those who don't participate in HE and on engaging employers to ensure students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can achieve successful outcomes. These policies include a renewed focus (and investment) in apprenticeships and the launch of Advanced Learning Loans.

The bad:

- *Funding systems and balance of funding (private/ public investment).* These have favoured young, full time, first-time students studying away from home.
- *Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) list.* Despite

expansion, this continues to restrict participation.

- *The “Sutton Trust” agenda.* The focus on getting a small number of high performing students into high-tariff HE institutions and a reluctance to recognise that there may be genuine economic, familial and/ or cultural reasons for wanting to study closer to home or through more flexible provision has distorted the debate about targeting of resources and what ‘success’ looks like.
- *Incomplete and/ or inconsistent Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).* This has resulted in skills mismatch (such as a lack of engineering and maths graduates) and mismatch of student aspirations with opportunities. For example, more than one third of English teenagers said they wanted to do just 10 highly competitive jobs (which included teacher/lecturer, lawyer, doctor and accountant) while the least popular jobs (including surveyor and welder) offer good career prospects and pay above national median salaries.¹

What do we want to achieve?

- We need an education system that effectively instils a certain level of learning and provides easily accessible routes at the times that students want to build on that learning.
- As different students will interact with education in different ways at different stages of their lives and will want to study different things, we need more flexibility in funding and administrative systems to accommodate this.

¹ National Careers Council (2013) *An Aspirational Nation: Creating a culture change in careers provision*, p08

Improving Information, Advice and Guidance

We need to improve the visibility of lifelong learning opportunities, course and training provision, and transition support. We believe that take up of learning opportunities is limited by a poor understanding of what provision is out there and how different students can access it.

1. Improving Information, Advice and Guidance

- Individuals should have access to a co-ordinated centralised administrative function alongside virtual or physical regional centres of excellence for lifelong learning. This approach would achieve the national coverage and efficiency savings of being centrally managed but would also be locally relevant by being linked to local centres of excellence which act as the experts on local industry demands and educational offers. It could be piloted to ensure it is relevant and impactful.
- This approach will enable us to identify and support what mature learners want to study and how they want to study. It would also be able to advise potential students on how to use their existing credit or informal learning to support their studies.
- It could focus on supporting people in work, and in low paid work in particular – those ‘just managing’ – who would benefit from information, advice and guidance on how to access further learning opportunities but are not able to access support available to some others, such as through Job Centres, because they are not receiving benefits.
- Such a function should be led by an independent body such as UCAS and involve other sector bodies such as QAA, JISC and the UK Credit Forum.

Flexing the funding arrangements

Currently, the system for controlling undergraduate fees works only in relation to whole academic years. This disincentivises accelerated provision and restricts student choice by limiting their ability to study at their own pace. A complete degree programme delivered in two years must be funded from only two years of fees – £18,000 in most universities.

2. Flexing the funding arrangements

- Remove the 'cap' where that prevents the delivery of accelerated degrees (see box above).
- Reintroduce Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) in England. Scotland continues to operate a version of IALs which have proven popular and successful in driving uptake of learning opportunities. Enabling collective learning accounts (as proposed in the NIACE review), where individuals can pool their investment for joint training, for example, would also be a complimentary addition that could expand student choice and demand. Unlike the first time they were trialled new systems in place such as the Student Loans Company, linking of HMRC data and individual learner numbers make it much harder to defraud the system.
- Loosen the eligibility criteria for Advanced Learning Loans.² We welcome the expansion in the age eligibility from 24+ to 19+ and to include more levels of study (up to level 6) but further flexibility that supports students to spend their loan on more modular learning that can be evidenced to

² <https://www.gov.uk/advanced-learner-loan/overview>

build up, over time, to a full qualification, would extend the reach of these loans. Although we must be careful to ensure any learning supports and enables progression and student success, 'full' qualifications tend to be much less attractive to more disadvantaged learners and encouraging them into study is paramount.³

³ Learning and Work Institute (2016) Power to the People: The case for Personal Learning Accounts, http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace_en/files/files/Lifetime%20learning%20policy%20solution%20FINAL.pdf



Incentivising collaboration and co-investment

Participating in lifelong learning creates benefits for individuals, for employers and for the country as a whole but there are costs associated – through fees but also opportunity costs, particularly for part-time students, who must juggle their study with other social and financial commitments such as work or family. At the same time, very disadvantaged learners are unlikely to take their first steps in HE and therefore any approach should involve a variety of institutions across different localities – FE colleges, informal learning networks such as U3A, Citizens Advice Bureaux, colleges, GPs, the workplace, Libraries and Local Learning Exchange centres.

3. Incentivising collaboration and co-investment

- Use individual learning accounts to highlight individuals' entitlement to education and skills development.
- Include a small government contribution on learning accounts to encourage take up of further opportunities – creating an entitlement that no one wants to miss out on. Or introduce a Help to Learn Bonus as argued for by the Learning and Work Institute – adding a Government top-up when people invest money in certain learning opportunities.⁴
- Incentivise employers to give employees help and support for opportunity costs involved in lifelong learning. For example, introducing an award or charter mark for businesses that are leading the way in supporting their

⁴ Learning and Work Institute (2016) Power to the People.

employees to combine work and study by providing a grant or loan for books or travel costs, or allowing them time off to study.

- Introduce some flexibility for how employers can spend their apprenticeship levy.
- Identify and promote specific incentives for industries currently underinvesting in higher level skills development. This might include accelerating the set-up of apprenticeship standards in more industries.
- Introduce a map for lifelong learning – in school and beyond – in a range of other institutions (see box above), to highlight various routes in and through education and training. This could help to encourage entry/ re-entry into education.
- Encourage universities to work with schools and to work with other communities outside school hours. The Learning and Work Institute's Family Learning Pilots showed that increasing the literacy and numeracy of family members has a positive impact on the take up of learning opportunities.⁵

⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2012) Family Learning Works, <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/our-resources/life-and-society/family-learning-works>



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