

Opinion



By concentrating on qualifications, we risk turning away adults who simply wish to learn, says Alan Tuckett

Adult Learners' Week kicks off this weekend with Jane Davidson, the education minister in Wales, leading an army of cyclists on learning journeys that will take them from Cardiff to Brecon. It includes parties and prize ceremonies, taster courses and performances. Gardener Monty Don contributes through the BBC's neighbourhood gardening initiative, and as in every other year, the stories of learners who have transformed their lives, or sustained them in the face of challenges, will be central to the week's events.

It comes this year at a critical time, as the struggle for allocations within the spending review education budget heats up, as the higher education bill reaches a critical stage of its passage through the House of Lords, and as liberal education for adults is put under pressure wherever it is offered.

The government's skills strategy sets ambitious goals for the adult workforce to develop skills for employability, but it is not clear where the money is to be found to fund them. There are, certainly, useful developments: in workplace learning, supported by the new and emerging sector skills councils; encouraging lessons from the employer training pilots, which pay employers to release staff to study; and the union learning fund and the rise of union learning representatives.

But the bulk of the work in achieving the skills strategy will be done in

publicly funded FE colleges. And colleges are facing the need to cut provision for adults, despite the new money in the sector, because of a surge in the number of 16-19s. As the law is written, the money available for work with adults is limited to what is left over once the needs of young people have been met.

Yet the key priority for the UK economy is building the skills and capability of the adult workforce, as a generation of skilled workers approaches retirement, leaving far more jobs making and mending things than young people can fill. Faced with tight budgets, local planners focus spending on courses leading to qualifications in work-related subjects. But as a survey to be published later this week by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (Niace) and the Centre for Labour Market Studies at Leicester University shows, qualifications are not a major motivator for most employed people who are learning.

The employer training pilots, too, show that qualifications are welcome icing on the cake. They follow the key tasks of motivating adults to take part, and building self-esteem and self-confidence. The first steps into learning build on whatever catches a potential learner's interest. Yet the routes into learning are narrowing sharply, as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) manages its shrinking adult budget by reducing the number of courses it will support outside the qualifications framework.

The old distinction between full-time and part-time students no longer makes sense

The recognition that adults need a credit-based achievement and qualifications structure, where credit can be accumulated during short passages of study, is welcome. The work needed to create it is formidable, yet there is a strong risk that many of the building blocks of a credit-based system may be dismantled before it is completed, to save money.

More money would help. Hence the importance, for adult learners, of the debates inside the Department for Education and Skills about where the education settlement announced in the budget is to be spent. Universities and schools always make an impressive case for more. But this time, in my view, the needs of adults in further education and training should come first. The skills strategy was surely right in recognising that what is needed is high-quality vocational education, coupled with good provision for adults to develop confidence in learning for its own sake. But both are needed. One cannot be bought at the expense of the other.

Funding affects adult participation

in higher education in a different way. As 19 of the 40 speeches in the House of Lords second reading debate on the higher education bill recognised, successive governments have paid too little attention to the needs of part-time students. Nine in 10 of them are adults aged 25 and over. The old distinction between full- and part-time no longer makes sense, when "full-time" students combine jobs and study. You don't find it in Australia or the US.

The case for mode-free funding is unarguable. Part-time students paying for themselves have as much of a case for fee deferral as full-time students. Treating them fairly will not come cheap, but it is surely right to commit to a mode-free system by, say 2010.

Of course, Adult Learners' Week is about more than public policy. It is built on a simple formula, copied now in more than 40 countries. Existing learners in all their diversity inspire others to give learning a go. The key messages — that learning is good for your health, your self-esteem and your employability — are backed now by solid evidence. There is plenty of passion for learning once it is unlocked. And one person's confidence spills over on to others.

That is the experience of successful economies, stimulating families, and enlightened communities alike. It is well worth celebrating — and it is worth funding, too.

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