

WEA Response to the FE White Paper: 'Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances'

1. The WEA recognises the clarity provided by the White Paper and the attention it has paid to the issues and proposals in the report by Sir Andrew Foster.
2. The WEA supports the Government's determination to improve skills levels for all school leavers and adults. The WEA will continue to target its work with those priority adults, particularly in the fields of basic skills, and through our community and workplace partnerships. However, as an adult provider we do have concerns that the balance of funding available to general FE colleges is not open to us in shifting priorities. Our current outreach work which is built within a mixed economy of fees and free provision for adults is in some jeopardy compared to providers who largely deal with 16-19 year olds.
3. We welcome the Government's intention to promote specialist providers and a more developed role for the voluntary sector. Within this, the WEA naturally very much welcomes the proposed involvement of learners and community groups in planning provision.
4. The WEA welcomes the statement in Chapter 2 that PCDL provision should be centred on local community priorities. We acknowledge that this provision will be developed through local LSC partnerships and therefore ask the DfES to consider how to progress with improving the strategic relationships between the LSC and the voluntary sector. The White Paper appears to assume that voluntary organisations operate entirely at local rather than national levels. This is disappointing given the current interest in how the voluntary sector can contribute to public services and engage with communities. In addition, we are concerned that a qualification framework entirely linked to Sector Skills Councils overlooks the position and value of programmes created and provided by the voluntary sector.
5. The WEA would welcome a more open, transparent and accountable relationship with all LSC Regions in England. This would assist in the proposals laid out in Chapter 2 as well as the proposal in Chapter 7 that providers will need formal agreement of their role within regional LSC plans. We are sure that there are several national charities which would also want a similar arrangement and we are prepared to offer any help we can to develop this where such organisations haven't had direct experience of the demands of LSC funding.
6. The A3 diagram '*Outcomes for Learning and Skills: Competitive Economy and Cohesive Society*' summarising the entitlements and linking it to equivalents in Every Child Matters is a good inclusion although needs further development to make the adult learner element as rich as that for children. This has had too little attention in reporting on the proposals.

7. We welcome the statement *“We have to engage not only with those learners and employers who already see how skills and qualifications can help them, but the millions who regard education and training as nothing of value to offer them”* (para 3.2). However, the White Paper does not include an effective strategy to engage the hardest to reach learners (see research by NIACE¹). Although the White Paper promises to maintain second chance learning, personal development, and stepping stone programmes for re-entry it does not commit to prioritising these areas or developing these areas of provision. The paper also does not address the link between poverty and weak literacy skills, especially learning at below Entry Level 3.
8. The WEA welcomes the White Paper’s acknowledgement of the need to increase employment rates among older workers and provide them with opportunities to learn new skills. However we feel that issues surrounding the UK’s ageing workforce need further consideration. The single paragraph in Chapter 2 dedicated to this issue promises collaboration between the DfES and DWP but goes no further than this. We are concerned that the needs of older adults in accessing and continuing learning will be lost in the LSC’s single focus on employability despite the emphasis given to learning across other agencies and government departments.
9. The White Paper clearly sets out the direction for ‘a new specialist system’ (p6) for the FE system which anticipates that each provider will focus on one or more areas of specialist excellence. The WEA currently has a distinctive adult learning mission which relates to the proposals made in Chapter 2. As the largest LSC funded voluntary sector provider in England, the WEA would seek to balance a significant contribution to any new developments in PCDL with our work on adult skills. We acknowledge the suggestion made in paragraph 2.48 that voluntary and community providers could specialise in PCDL provision however we are concerned that individuals will increasingly be expected to pay for PCDL learning and that this area of provision may not be LSC funded in future.
10. The LSC itself is enthusiastic about continuing to develop a single focus on skills and purchasing. We know that Personal & Community Development learning is not an area many within the LSC see as a priority. Is it realistic to believe the LSC can take a lead in this area and develop the partnerships, learner voice and community and voluntary sector planning envisaged?
11. We are concerned by ongoing generalisations about non-qualification bearing learning. The long-term erosion of continuing education in higher education and the current narrow focus of agencies supervising FE has led to an assertion that this provision is only about leisure and recreation. We believe that serious liberal education should be open to all as part of an educated democracy and an active citizenship. A knowledge of history, literature and society should not be limited to a metropolitan elite or those with degrees. Lifelong learning ‘for its own sake’ should include them across the whole country. There needs to be a clear distinction around education that maintains and builds cultural capital and civic society and differentiates between this and leisure and recreational classes.

¹ Veronica McGivney- Fixing or Changing the Pattern; Working with Excluded Groups

12. The new entitlement for free tuition for all 19-25 year olds studying their first level 3 qualification is a positive move which the WEA welcomes. However, we are concerned that the White Paper offers very little opportunity for the many adults that do not fit into this narrow age category. For example, Access to HE programmes have had a significant impact on the opportunities of women returning to the labour market over the last 20 years. These are rarely taken by people under 25.
13. The decision to move the assumed fee level up so drastically is likely to impact most strongly on the groups with least discretionary disposable income – for example – women in hard-working families just above means testing levels; pensioners on fixed incomes and women in some BME communities who have no access to household income. In addition, the economy of class provision is likely to mean that, if these people withdraw or reduce their participation, classes with some fee payers and fee remitted students will have insufficient numbers to be viable and their learning opportunity may also be closed off. Promises to increase the Learner Support Fund² in recognition of these costs in adult learning have not been honoured by the LSC's allocations for 2006-07 which has cut this funding.
14. As an example, there is important provision for people with disabilities that is currently being lost. The Royal National Institute for the Deaf has drawn our attention to the damaging changes to the provision of training in Lip Reading. In this context, the current priorities are leading to a severe loss of important provision for adults who are losing their hearing. Across the country provision is being cut or forced to close by the introduction of high fees that these learners can't pay.
15. In addition, whilst the expectation that higher fees should be paid is understood, there are WEA students already arguing that they shouldn't have to pay for the current levels of regulatory bureaucracy if they have to eventually equally share the cost of provision for which it is required.
16. The intention of the White Paper to provide clarity and empower and energise the FE system is clear and welcome. However, we are concerned that this is in contrast to a period of confusion and turbulence in the LSC. Agenda for Change set out to address criticisms of the bureaucracy involved in the funding and planning of FE. These were echoed in the Foster Report. The current situation is not encouraging. It is difficult to get decisions or responses from the LSC and there are more layers within the organisation and little apparent interest in the Development Plans requested of providers. In addition, the new the Train to Gain tendering arrangement has been exceptionally bureaucratic. If providers of adult learning are to cope with reduced funding and the shift on fee levels there must be rapid and convincing improvements in bureaucracy and responsiveness in the LSC. This must be accompanied by real progress in funding simplification and in the Framework for Achievement and Foundation Learning Tier.

² Para 53 of Priorities for Success says "Learner Support funds will be sustained and increased from current levels".

17. Whilst the White Paper does give a clear direction to FE colleges who can shift to younger learners, the lack progress on key areas to support all adult learning, combined with cuts and fee increases make providers who only engage with adults exceptionally vulnerable. In the case of national providers like the WEA with provision in every local LSC area there is the additional danger that local planning arrangements will overlook their role. This also applies to a number of national voluntary sector organisations.
18. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the White Paper. I would reiterate that we believe it provides a clear overall direction for the FE system and opportunities for specialist providers to innovate alongside more defined General FE providers. However, we believe that there are potential losers in the plans on fees and these may be more disadvantaged and marginalised adults than is intended. In addition, we are asking whether the LSC will be able to transform itself quickly to take a helpful role in these changes and allow providers the space to deliver skills, knowledge, quality and innovation.