Learning Through Life
Five years on: where now for lifelong learning?

the Inquiry’s legacy | shaping the future | NIACE’s manifesto for change
Learning Through Life: how far have we come?

DAVID WATSON and TOM SCHULLER, authors of *Learning Through Life*, the final report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, ask what has changed since its publication and assess its legacy and relevance five years on.

Learning Through Life: where now for lifelong learning?

*Learning Through Life* has had significant impact on thinking in the lifelong learning sector, but progress towards its broad vision has been slow. We asked the experts to assess the impact of the report’s recommendations, and to identify the challenges the sector faces in achieving its vision.

**Recommendation 1**

Base lifelong learning policy on a new, four-stage model of the educational life course

Karen Evans

**Recommendation 2**

Rebalance resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages

Stephen McNair
Lifelong learning is still the ‘Cinderella’ sector, some way behind the economy, immigration, health, and school education in the priorities of the main parties. Nevertheless, if we are to address the demographic and technological challenges we face as an economy and as a society, we need a skills strategy fit for the times.

The next UK government, we believe, should recognise its role in forming a new social contract that enables and encourages investment in skills for adults of all ages to benefit our economy and society.

‘A manifesto for lasting change’, page 30
In 2007 NIACE commissioned the ambitious and far-reaching Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. Over two years, the Inquiry brought together experts from government, business, academia, trade unions, public services, providers and the third sector, as well as learners, to help the commissioners build a broad consensus on the future of lifelong learning in the UK. Its main report, *Learning Through Life*, was published in 2009.

This issue of *Adults Learning* considers the legacy of the report and the situation now. Since its publication, there has been a change of government and some important policy shifts, while the economic context has presented new and significant resource challenges that are forcing bold experimentation in the funding of education. Despite these often profound—and sometimes unexpected—changes to the ecology of the sector, the recommendations made by the Inquiry remain relevant and we built on them in our manifesto, *Skills for Prosperity*, which is setting the agenda in the run-up to next year’s general election.

The Inquiry’s key recommendation, that lifelong learning policy should be based on a new model of the educational life course, with an emphasis on stage rather than age, is probably more urgent today than it was five years ago. It is clear that the balance of resources remains unfairly skewed towards young people. This is despite more and more compelling evidence about the need to support people to have more productive and better-paid careers which last longer into their lives. The Mid-Life Career Review, which has provided more than 3000 adults aged between 45 and 65 with access to a holistic review of their future options, is one legacy of the stage-not-age approach. This was a major piloting of an idea we have championed in our recent manifesto, which is being adopted by the major parties in the run-up to the next election, and some version of this policy is likely to be a key feature of adult learning during the next Parliament.

*Learning Through Life*, of course, recommended a fair rebalancing of learning resources across the different life stages. The report emphasised the need for public agreement on the fair and effective allocation of learning resources in achieving this. Our manifesto takes up this recommendation in calling for a major, independent review into the long-term skills needs and funding issues facing the UK over the next 20 years. This, we argue, should take the form of a four-nation, cross-party commission to develop a long-term settlement for skills and learning which supports occupational up-skilling, re-skilling and lifelong learning. Critically, this must address the incentives given for employers to invest in their workforces and for people to invest in their own learning and skills. It is not enough to simply concentrate on government spending on learning and skills. A commission should be capable of producing recommendations (we hope, by 2018) that all parties, and wider society, can agree on.

The Inquiry recommended a set of learning entitlements with funding channelled through a national system of learning accounts. This, too, we take up in our manifesto. One of our priority actions is for a new personal skills account for all adults, linked to an entitlement to career reviews, to help people decide what skills...
development will work for them and to give them real power about what, where and how they learn. There is increasing policy interest in exploring this funding approach, despite the well-documented and easily remedied failures in the implementation of Individual Learning Accounts a decade ago.

This is not the only area of policy in which Learning Through Life has continuing relevance. The report called for faster progress towards an effective system of credit transfer and accumulation, in order to support adults wishing to combine study with other activities. Our work has shown that unitised qualifications are a powerful approach for many people entering learning at lower levels. We will continue to work with Ofqual and awarding organisations to make sure that those bite-sized qualifications still exist. The announcement by Ofqual, that they will dismantle the prescriptive Qualifications and Credit Framework, points to the failure of the system to fully enable flexibility and unitisation. It does not diminish the need and demand from learners for what it should have offered. What remains, regrettably, is an underdeveloped part of our thinking about learning and skills.

Learning Through Life’s emphasis on improving the quality of work, and on how skills are used in the workplace, has been reflected in numerous influential reports since its publication. There has been a flurry of reports in recent months, from the UKCES, OECD and CBI, among others, addressing concerns about workplace productivity and the role skills can play for people of all ages. There remains a long list of issues which challenge policy today: how localism will work; where funding will come from to support the 5 million people in low-paid jobs; and how we can reach a more stable policy position which gives the freedoms required for true innovation and creative solutions. I could go on – too much time and effort is spent on trying to reform the education and training system which supports young people transitioning into work and not enough on trying address the needs of people over 21 who face careers of perhaps 45 to 50 years.

A good deal of NIACE’s work over the past five years has supported the Inquiry’s recommendations, notably on citizenship and strengthening the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce. The report’s call for a common framework of learning opportunities aimed at enhancing people’s control over their lives led to our current development of a citizen’s curriculum. This initiative is being enthusiastically adopted by a variety of adult learning providers and policy leaders across the country. We are also active in a series of initiatives to broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce, in partnership with organisations such as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), the Association of Colleges and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers.

The report stressed the importance of decentralising the delivery of skills. Many of the recommendations made in Learning Through Life were accepted by the Heseltine report No Stone Unturned, while the development of City Deals and the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships demonstrates the continuing relevance of the Inquiry’s emphasis on the need to ‘restore life and power to local levels’.

The report’s call for a single department with lead responsibility for promoting lifelong learning is also reflected in our manifesto. There is a need for a greater co-ordination at the heart of government, hence our call for a single UK government department responsible for education, skills and work, bringing together schooling, further and higher education within one department of state, along with the welfare-to-work policies of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Overall, this edition of Adults Learning shows that there has been progress in many areas over the past five years. However, the stark reality is that the credit crunch has led to lower investment by employers and by the government in learning and skills. The last government publication on numbers of people supported in learning showed large decreases at all levels and a particularly worrying drop in people learning at Levels 3 and 4 and in part-time higher education. All of this is felt in the economy, by businesses and by adults. The results are lower productivity, less successful and inclusive growth and lower opportunities for people to progress in life and work.

As the recent UKCES report Growth Through People shows, there are wide skills gaps and skills shortages across our economy, with low productivity sitting alongside millions of people stuck in low-paid work or not able to access full-time work. We also have an ageing population and we need more people in work to find ways to improve their skills. The dysfunction of the current skills system was recently highlighted by the OECD report Skills Beyond School, which states that England and Northern Ireland ‘stand out as countries where, relative both to other countries and to potential demand, there is limited provision of postsecondary vocational training, potentially leading to a shortage of mid-level skills.’ We must find a cross-party consensus which provides confidence to learners and employers as well as colleges, universities and training providers to invest in and deliver a highly trained, motivated workforce of individuals who can thrive in their careers.

I hope that you will find this edition of Adults Learning informative, challenging and inspiring. The vision of Learning Through Life remains fundamental to the successful development and long-term planning of lifelong learning in the UK. We have made some progress but it is sobering to reflect on how much more needs to be done. Too many people of all ages are not able to access the flexible, high quality and motivating learning and skills they need to be active citizens and successful in the labour market. Too many employers are facing up to how hard it is to be successful when skills gaps and shortages are widening. We need a new learning and skills strategy which works for people, employers, society and the economy and we need the next government, whatever its composition, to grasp these challenges.

David Hughes
is Chief Executive of NIACE
In September 2009 NIACE published Learning Through Life, the final report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. It offered a thorough, independent examination of the UK’s lifelong learning sector, led by a group of 10 prominent commissioners and involving widespread consultation, the publication of some 30 research and discussion papers, and the maintenance of an active web-based discussion. Here we offer an invitation to readers of Adults Learning to join us in assessing developments in and through lifelong learning since then.

Learning Through Life received widespread endorsement across the political, professional and public spectrums, nationally and internationally. It performed two major tasks: one empirical and one conceptual.

Substantively, it was the first time data on all sources of spending on all types of post-compulsory education and training in the UK was collected and categorised. Public and private resources invested in lifelong learning amounted to more than £55 billion in 2009. That’s around about 3.9 per cent of GDP – reaching approximately £93 billion if opportunity costs are added.

Theoretically, the report consolidated the argument for access to lifelong learning as a right. The commission started from the premise that the right to learn is a human right, connected with personal growth and emancipation, prosperity, group and community solidarity, as well as global responsibility. Our instincts were against compulsion and fixed formulae. Instead, Learning Through Life set out a framework of opportunity, structured around investment, incentives and capabilities. The report’s vision was of ‘a society in which learning plays its full role in personal growth, prosperity, solidarity and local and global responsibility’ (pp. 8–9). Our goal was to set an agenda for lifelong learning that would make sense for the next quarter-century.

The commission made 10 recommendations to shape this agenda. The final recommendation stated that we had to make the system intelligent, with the support of a triennial ‘State of Learning’ report. The system, we argued, will only flourish with consistent information and evaluation, and open debate about the implications. Our view today is that there is growing awareness of this need, and that the capacity to deliver the analysis and evaluation is greater than it was in 2009. The crucial need is for a process to bring together the relevant information, and generate informed discussion on an ongoing basis.

This article can be taken as a kind of State of Learning report, albeit two years late and necessarily underpowered. The overall picture is not very encouraging. Five years on, in a context of post-crash austerity, a coalition government that has run out of steam, and international tensions at a height not seen since the end of the Cold War, it is a good time to see how much progress (if any) has been made on the other nine big ideas.

Stage not age

The first recommendation was to base lifelong learning policy on a new model of the educational life course, with four key stages, up to 25, 25–50, 50–75 and 75 plus. Our approach to lifelong learning, we argued in the report, should deal far more positively with two major trends: an ageing society and changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity.

The commission found that the transition into young adulthood was taking longer. There used to be an assumption that this occurred at around 16 years, then 18. Now it’s not until around 25 that directions appear to be set. Young people are growing up both faster and slower. Cultural independence is juxtaposed with economic dependence. Then there is the heartland experience of work, family and other responsibility, and (it seems) temporarily declining satisfaction (these are the
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Tom Schuller • David Watson


‘time pressure’ years). At the third stage, the assumption that work continues until we simply fall into official ‘retirement’ at 60 or 65 is seriously outdated. We found evidence of an increased negotiation of types of work and responsibility from the mid-50s onwards, and saw this stretching through to around 75. Finally, we drew on substantial evidence that learning in older age (75–100) can reduce dependency as well as enrich life.

Since 2009 there have been some significant changes. Intergenerational sensitivities could be said to have increased, without very much practical attention to their alleviation. The age for compulsory education will rise to 18 in 2015. The phenomenon of the ‘boomerang’ generation – of young people unable to leave, or having to return to, the parental home – has intensified. Consciousness of demographic pressures is growing, and has sparked some creative (as well as some panicked) thinking about pensions and the need to reduce the retirement cliff-edge. Longer working lives are now firmly in the frame, including through the deferral of the state pension, often through part-time and self-employment. So there is some awareness of the need to change the way we think about ages and stages. But old categories die hard. The debate has had a strong zero-sum focus on the material tensions in the way private wealth and public benefits are distributed across generations. Learning rarely figures, even when dependency issues are discussed. A welcome exception is the Foresight Ageing Project, a cross-sectoral initiative based in the Government Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser, which is due to report in 2015–16.

Allocation of resources
In response to some of these trends, the report proposed rebalancing learning resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages. Their distribution, we argued, should reflect a coherent view of our changing economic and social context. Broad allocations have changed little since 2009. At present, the allocation of resources is approximately as follows across the four quarters of a potential one hundred year life-span: 86: 11: 2.5: 0.5. The report proposed that it should be modestly re-balanced by 2020, as follows: 80: 15: 4: 1. The adjustment costs of this change would be reduced by the projected drop in the numbers of young people in the next decade.

The big change to have taken place in educational funding in the years since we reported has been the formal shift of a large part of responsibility for the costs of higher education (with the exception of Scotland) from the state to students, with funds advanced through the Student Loans Company, to be recovered on an income-contingent basis. The evidence, however, is that it is not going to work as its designers (the coalition) hoped. Declining estimates of the recovery rate of loans now mean that the system is likely to be more expensive to the public purse than the one it replaced. The loans approach has now been extended to 19–25 year olds in further education, with results that are, as yet, very unclear. Meanwhile, enrolments of mature and part-time students have collapsed, marking a major shift away from lifelong learning.

There are some signs that older workers are getting more access to training opportunities. Apprenticeship numbers dominate the pre-election political bidding war, without being located in the wider context of vocational learning pathways. However, the political imperatives sparked by severe youth unemployment and controversy about university fees have excluded any debate on a more rational allocation of resources across the life-course stages. One key issue is whether we can have this debate without exacerbating latent intergenerational tensions.

Learning entitlements
Learning Through Life’s third recommendation proposed building a set of learning entitlements. Structurally, we felt that some entitlements should be universal, including basic skills at all ages and a ‘threshold’ or ‘platform’ to step off into lifelong learning, from the equivalent of high-school graduation and university matriculation, as well as access to IT. Above all, lifelong learning should foster not a crude selective meritocracy (as in Michael Young’s satire) but recurrent opportunity. Other entitlements should relate to working life. ‘Learning leave’ is a powerful device here. We suggested that this could be funded by redeploying the £3.7 billion of corporation tax relief then granted for training. Yet others could support voluntary and
involuntary transitions, such as a ‘welcome’ entitlement for those crossing borders to join new communities, or leaving institutions such as prisons or care.

‘Entitlement’ has since become a term freighted with negative connotations. The political bidding war on immigration has led to a presumption against ‘welcome’ benefits, and English language provision, in particular, has suffered. One bright feature is the continued flourishing of Unionlearn, with government support, strengthening the entitlement of poorly qualified employees to learning, but even here there have been cuts. The contribution of substantial tax relief has been recognised, but there has been no move to earmark it for learning leave.

**A system of credit**

Fourthly, the report argued that we need to engineer flexibility, via a system of credit and by encouraging part-time study. It was clear that much faster progress was needed in the UK to implement a credit-based system, making learning more flexible and accessible with funding matched to it. Crudely, we have the systems, but we are very reluctant to use them. The commissioners felt that adopting approaches to funding that are agnostic in mode, across the whole array of post-compulsory education, was vital to unlock this potential.

Research shows literally no progress on this front. The UK – even in Scotland, which has made a great play of policy commitment in this area – remains a laggard, behind North America in terms of credit-transfer between institutions and behind continental Europe in terms of student mobility. The Open University continues to make a heroic contribution to this area – remains a laggard, behind North America in terms of credit-transfer between institutions and behind continental Europe in terms of student mobility. The Open University continues to make a heroic contribution to this effort, but is increasingly constrained by funding assumptions linked to full-time learning.

**Quality of work**

The fifth recommendation stressed the need to use learning to improve the quality of work. The debate on skills, we argued, has been too dominated by an emphasis on increasing the volume of skills. There should be a stronger focus on how skills are actually used. The report pointed to a ‘naïve belief that upgrading qualifications for the population as a whole will produce all of the benefits which are only accrued by the subset of people who currently have those qualifications’. Instead, the report said, we need more genuine and portable accreditation, notably of what have been identified by Lorna Unwin and others as ‘expansive’ rather than ‘restricted’ learning environments at work. There was an equity issue here too, we found, with access to training diminishing down the status ladder.

There are signs now that the debate on skills is becoming more nuanced, aiming to bring supply and utilisation into some kind of relationship, instead of just boosting the numbers of qualified people. Recent academic and think-tank analysis gives us a more fine-grained picture of supposed labour-market polarisation, including recognition (by the Institute for Public Policy Research and others) of the continued creation of jobs in the bottom half of the occupational ladder. We must also challenge the idea that job quality is purely technology-dependent: there is space for managing the organisation of work to make good use of a wide range of skills and experience. A particular issue is whether the increasing qualifications of women will be properly recognised at work, allowing genuine careers stretching over several decades and including breaks (another argument for taking our life-course approach seriously).

The big story, though, is about how austerity has bred precarity. The political self-congratulation over the number of new jobs should be tempered by the knowledge that many of them are low-grade, fragmented and insecure, taking us further from a genuine high-skill economy. The rise of ‘zero-hours’ contracts, the growth of unpaid internships, and the macro-economic evidence about increasing income disparity, makes the prospect of more, better jobs increasingly remote.

**Citizens’ capabilities**

The report proposed constructing a curriculum framework for citizens’ capabilities. A common framework of learning opportunities should be created, which should be available in any given area, giving people control over their own lives. There should be a common core of provision: of content (initially around digital, health, financial and civic capabilities – the downsides of lacking these are all too clear), of local and contextual customisation, of quality assurance, and of support for teachers and other key ‘intermediaries’ (such as Citizens’ Advice Bureaux advisers, probation officers and health visitors).

Regrettably, over the past five years, the prospect of a coherent framework has, if anything, receded, though NIAE continues helpfully to press on this theme. Confusion and stress have grown in the intermediary services mentioned above, often because of privatisation or economic pressure. Massive health service reforms could both support and undermine the necessary preventative public health agenda. Entitlements to learning support continue to fluctuate wildly, including according to political fashion. Yet, in an unplanned way, the prospects of achieving some of these capabilities are probably increasing, for those who can find their way. There are, for example, flourishing and imaginative local initiatives around community-based learning, but they, too, buck the funding trend.

We should acknowledge here one area which Learning Through Life did not do enough to address: the growth of technology-enabled learning. There are very varied views on how far online learning (for example through MOOCs) replaces or complements more traditional modes of adult learning, but this is definitely an area where change is accelerating and opportunity is expanding.

**Strengthening the workforce**

Our thinking about capabilities led us to recommend broadening and strengthening the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce. Stronger support, we argued, should be available for all those involved in delivering education and training (including intermediaries).

Most of the creative thinking in this area since seems to have been in the corporate sector. Microsoft presents a good example, with accredited courses not only for its own employees, but also for those using their products across the industry. Learning Through Life’s prediction of a growth in private providers has certainly been vindicated, with quality seen as largely market-
determined. The Education and Training Foundation has been set up to promote workforce development within the sector, but, overall, it's probably true that the adult teaching workforce continues to fragment. There is less support for individuals to maintain their competences, and less pressure on employers to use professionally qualified staff.

Local responsibility
The remaining two recommendations flowed together. First, there was a call to revive local responsibility. We should restore life and power to local levels, we argued. This could be achieved by a variety of steps: stronger local strategy-making by local authorities; greater autonomy for further education colleges, as the institutional backbone of local lifelong learning; stronger local employer networks; a major role for cultural institutions; and local ‘Learning Exchanges’ for connecting teachers with learners, providing a single information point, social learning spaces and an entitlement ‘bank’.

It is now common ground across the political spectrum that the current system in England has become over-centralised, and insufficiently linked to local and regional needs. The Scottish referendum debate put this issue centre-stage. Whether this will lead to genuine and effective devolution at different levels is another matter.

One of the specific casualties of austerity has been local authority finance, and its strategic capacity. Libraries have closed, and the spread of new school types – financed by public money but relatively outside public control – has undermined the concept of community service. New school models (free-schools and academies) threaten to undermine the ‘full service’ school project. There are some signs of fresh thinking on how to restore some strategic local capacity, but it will be a long road back.

National frameworks
At the same time, we argued (in our ninth recommendation) national frameworks matter. There should be effective machinery for creating a coherent lifelong learning strategy across the UK, and within the UK’s four nations. Learning Through Life argued that we need a single department with lead authority on lifelong learning, and an independent body to check on progress.

There is no sign of progress on this. Responsibility for skills ricochets around ministers, and policy silos are as entrenched as ever, as Sir Bob Kerslake’s farewell speech as head of the Civil Service, in September 2014, acknowledged. Devolution could continue the Balkanisation of policy, provision and performance – though it will offer the opportunity for interesting comparisons between national systems.

We have sketched a rather gloomy picture. Nevertheless, our sense is still that there is a compelling logic to the inquiry’s approach, powered by broad social trends which run counter to the insensitivity, lack of ‘memory’ and structural despair of much current policy thinking. Learning Through Life started a debate about all of these issues. How can we revive and continue it?

David Watson was Chair and Tom Schuller Director of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). They are joint authors of Learning Through Life (NIACE, 2009).

Many of the Inquiry’s papers are still available at: http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/

To contribute to the debate email: editor@niace.org.uk.
Learning Through Life: where now for lifelong learning?

Learning Through Life has had significant impact on thinking in the lifelong learning sector, but progress towards its broad vision has been slow. We asked the experts to assess the impact of the report’s recommendations, and to identify the challenges the sector faces in achieving its vision.

Recommendation 1: Base lifelong learning policy on a new, four-stage model of the educational life course

Karen Evans

The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL) called for lifelong learning policy to be based on a new four-stage (up to 25, 25–50, 50–75 and 75–plus) model. Its report argued that the UK’s approach was ‘not responding adequately to two major trends: an ageing society and changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity.’ It recommended that people in the first stage (up to 25) ‘be looked on as a whole, with all of its members having claims to learning and development’; that learning in the second stage (25–50) ‘should aim at productivity and prosperity, but also build strong family lives and personal identity’; that educational opportunities be ‘greatly enhanced’ for those in the third stage (50–75); that we should develop a ‘more appropriate approach to the curriculum offer in later life’ (75+); and that 25, 50 and 75 should be seen as ‘key transition points’, each requiring access to advice and guidance through life planning.

Historically, the education of adults has been treated as though adulthood is an undifferentiated state. The problematic nature of this assumption was highlighted long ago by adult educators who argued that the early stages of adult life were differentiated from the middle and later years by the goals, priorities and preferences characteristic of each stage. The increasing heterogeneity of life experience, combined with the recognition of the diversifying effects of social change, then challenged the uncritical application of a life-stage approach. This was, in turn, succeeded by a notion of diverse and changing life patterns involving the interplay of life, work and learning. The IFLL model, while based on the notion of life stages, avoided its pitfalls by focusing on changing configurations of life, work and learning, particularly in the later years.

The rethinking of existing models for the timing and sequencing of educational participation has been established to some degree. It is now widely recognised that a single training period before entry into the labour market is no longer sufficient, and that future
workers have to be prepared for continuous learning as well as re-skilling throughout their working lives. Policies, it is understood, need to respond to these changes and take a broader, longer-term view, with greater focus on the utilisation of knowledge and skills in and beyond the workplace, incentives and the quality of working environments. While a flexible, reasonably permeable structure of education is a strength of UK arrangements, as Learning Through Life noted, its operation depends on the extent to which policies enable people to return to education after a problematic start, and provide the resources and structure to enable lifelong learning as people change direction and pursue new opportunities or ways of realising their potential.

The rebalancing of resources advocated by IFLL has not advanced since 2009. Indeed, the process appears to have gone into reverse. The dominant economic view is that the returns to public investment of adult learning are too low to warrant large-scale public funding, with a refocusing of resources on early years. Yet, the evidence on low returns has been challenged by recent research carried out by the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) that shows significant returns to participants in lifelong learning, with improvements in both their employability and employment prospects. Under conditions of growing social polarisation and economic uncertainty, lifelong learning is shown to have a significant protective effect by keeping adults close to a changing labour market, alongside the wider benefits that have already been demonstrated.

Instead, we have seen the reversal of historic gains in adult participation in education. In higher education, for example, older students, especially part-time undergraduates, have been deterred from entering HE because of the new funding arrangements. Between 2010–11 and 2013–14 the number of UK and EU part-time undergraduate entrants to HE institutions in England fell by 46 per cent, according to Oxford Economics. Some part-time undergraduates can now access student loans to cover their tuition fees. However, as Claire Callender points out, take-up has been far lower than predicted, suggesting that loans are not necessarily perceived by would-be students as an adequate safeguard against the risks of part-time study (the majority of potential part-time students do not, in any case, qualify). According to Callender, part-time study has become unaffordable for many potential students.

Some advocates of rebalancing fear that the plight of young people affected by the recession may be undermining the case for rebalancing in favour of older age groups. But the emphasis on the damaged prospects of the young does not weaken the case for long-term rebalancing. It actually strengthens it. The economic crash has affected young people disproportionately and is likely to affect their lives into the long-term future, not only in terms of lifetime earnings but also in terms of health and civic life, which tend to build in tandem with work careers as social networks develop.

Furthermore, the recognition is growing that many of today’s young people are likely to experience poorer longer-term prospects and less prosperity than their parents’ generation. And adults now in their late thirties are likely on average to have significantly better lifetime prospects than those aged under 30 who have felt the full force of the recession and will experience the consequences for many years to come.

The report of the independent Social Integration Commission, published in October 2014, underlines tensions between age groups, in its predictions of a ‘path to a fragmented society’. Declining social mobility and increased isolation among some economic, ethnic and age groups portend problems in employment, health and social stability. The report estimates that a lack of social integration is costing the UK around £6 billion each year. LLAKES research has also identified these trends, showing how lifelong learning can contribute to improved social integration by achieving greater equity in the distribution of knowledge and skills – not just raising levels
of knowledge and skill but also attending to how skills are spread around the population. Effective policies for the future should include: an integrated policy approach, instead of a concentration of efforts on selected problems; consideration of the interaction between labour-market changes and other aspects of the transitions of adult life, such as living arrangements, family formation and health; consideration of ‘outsiders’ and minority groups and approaches that facilitate participation, integration, and empowerment; support for second and third chances, enabling recovery and repair after a problematic start or unforeseen setbacks later in life; and opportunities for lifelong learning that expand human capabilities and horizons throughout the life course and into old age.

The ageing society was identified by IFLL as a major driver of change. According to the standard definition used by the United Nations, societies where the proportion of the population aged 65 and over is greater than seven per cent, 14 per cent or 20 per cent are called, respectively, ‘aging societies’, ‘aged societies’, or ‘super-aged societies’. The UK became an ageing society in 1929 and an aged society in 1976 and it is projected to become a super-aged society by 2021. This is slower rate of change than experienced in many countries, particularly in Asia, but there is an increasing momentum to the debate on the impact of demographic changes.

With longer working lives now firmly established, there are already upward trends in training by older workers. The third age has become the ‘second middle age’ in which individuals continue their life activities in a modified form. They may work part time in so-called bridge jobs that provide a gradual transition from a full-time career to retirement. Meanwhile, they may be doing volunteer work, maintaining a busy social life, and participating in recreational and cultural events. They will be caring for children and influencing the young in many ways. And many older adults will face increasing risks of poverty and exclusion as income declines or as instabilities of earlier life stages intensify in their effects on income and wellbeing. This ‘third age’ of active older adults gradually gives way to a ‘fourth age’ often characterised by a decline into inactivity, a characterisation disputed by some. Learning support here can assist adjustment to ageing, offer mental stimulation and provide the resources for new roles, as community volunteers, grandparents and carers. The case for rebalancing resources in this direction could potentially be tied to health issues, with illness prevention and later-life wellbeing as outcomes, but the prospects for this are subject to the uncertain effects of health service reform.

Finally, the IFLL position on key transition points recognises that transitions in youth and adult life are markers of diversification of the life course, opening up new opportunities as well as challenges. Current change in access to pension funds is an example of a policy-led development that opens up social challenges as well as individual opportunities and risks. Good-quality guidance and adult learning will be key ingredients in negotiating these changes. Gaining a better understanding of changing demands and how these are negotiated in changing social landscapes and throughout the life course demands a new perspective, moving from narrow versions of rational choice theory towards models of biographical negotiation as promising avenues for effective policy-making.

Karen Evans is Chair of Education (Lifelong Learning), at the Institute of Education, University of London

**Recommendation 2:** Rebalance resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages

*Stephen McNair*

Perhaps the most radical proposal of the Inquiry was that, as a society, we should rethink our understanding of the life course. Public policy should, in future, replace the three-phase model (youth, adulthood and retirement, divided at 18/21 and 60/65) with a four-phase one (divided at 25, 50 and 75), to reflect the fact that young people now take longer to become established in full adult roles, and that a substantial period of later life (the ‘third age’) is spent in new forms of extended working life and active retirement, before the onset of traditional ‘old age’. Such a model would challenge the way we now distribute work...
and other roles: expecting people in the 25–49 phase to take on a wide range of very high-pressured roles, before beginning to dismiss them from the workforce after 50, when they remain active and motivated and often have more time and resource to contribute.

The Inquiry used the four-phase framework to assess the fairness and efficiency of the distribution of resources and participation in learning. It estimated that total expenditure on post-school learning from all sources, public, private and voluntary (including individual learners and employers), is of the order of £55 billion, of which only 46 per cent is public expenditure (even in the broadest sense). The balance of spend between the four phases was very heavily skewed to the youngest group: expenditure per head in each of the four phases was £8045, £283, £86 and £60, and the imbalance was even stronger for public spending.

Although there is a clear case for spending most on the first phase, when people are entering adult life and establishing themselves in the workforce, the Inquiry challenged the scale of the disproportion in the context of an ageing society. It proposed that some of the savings resulting from the shrinking numbers of (expensive) young people in education might be used to fund a much larger expansion of (cheaper) older people's learning. This would make economic sense. As people are retiring later, and the pace of change in technology and knowledge accelerates, the need for updating and retraining later in life, and well into the third phase, is strong. In the third and fourth phases, learning is also important to maintain social engagement, to find productive activity, as well as to maintain health and wellbeing.

Has any of this redistribution of participation, money or attention taken place? There is some good news. NIACE's annual survey of adult participation in learning shows that the impact of age on participation has diminished: where participation used to fall steadily from 20 to 65, it now remains broadly level from 25 to 50, but then still falls off steeply. The two national surveys of older people's learning, conducted by NIACE in 2006 and 2012, provide more detailed evidence about the two oldest groups. For people over 50, the total volume of learning (in all forms) remained broadly similar, with 20 per cent undertaking some learning in the past three years. However, where they were learning had changed significantly. There has been a large-scale withdrawal of public further and higher education institutions from this market, with...
the proportion of older learners studying in FE colleges falling from 21 per cent to eight per cent, and in HE from 14 per cent to seven per cent. At the same time, self-organised learning by older people appears to have grown dramatically, with the U3A now reporting a membership of over 270,000 people (a similar number to the number lost from FE and HE, though perhaps not the same people). Between the two surveys, the proportion ‘learning online’ rose from almost nothing to 15 per cent on skills and knowledge to others’, followed by ‘getting and keeping paid work’. For those aged between 65 and 74, on the other hand, health, digital engagement and managing caring roles were the priority. For those aged 75-plus the first benefits were in social engagement, health and managing life crises.

However, since the Inquiry, government policy has not changed much and tension remains between departments. Although more training for the over-50s could help achieve the Department for Work and Pensions’ objective of keeping older people active longer in the labour market, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has concentrated resources increasingly on young people entering the labour market, and age, beyond 25, is not mentioned in BIS plans for the reform of publicly funded post-school education. Furthermore, people over 50 were removed from the priority groups for the National Careers Service.

On a more positive note, older people are potential beneficiaries of the government’s community learning initiatives, which adopt partnership and ‘pound-plus’ approaches to the public funding available. NIACE’s 2010 paper Choice and Opportunity aimed to help local partnerships, led by local authorities and local health trusts, to review and stimulate learning for older people at local level, although it is not clear that this has made much impact as yet. One major step forward was the agreement by BIS in 2012 to fund NIACE to lead a national pilot project to test demand for a ‘mid-life career review’ of a kind implied in the Inquiry report. The evidence, from over 3000 careers sessions, was very positive and it now seems possible that, through the National Careers Service and other partners, people will in future have access to a life review around the age of 50, which can help them make informed decisions about the third phase of life, including retirement decisions and further learning. This would be a major achievement of one of the Inquiry’s ambitions.

We are still far from the grand vision of Learning Through Life, but there is progress. NIACE continues to pursue the issues affecting older people, including continuing to convene the National Older Learners Group: a forum for national agencies concerned with all aspects of older people’s learning. With the group, we are now updating our previous policy papers, to make the case (again) for investment in older people’s learning, identifying key challenges and making policy recommendations.

Stephen McNair is a Senior Research Fellow at NIACE
Recommendation 3: Build a set of learning entitlements

Tom Wilson

E very child has a right to learn. Why not adults? That was the idea behind the Inquiry’s notion of an entitlement to learn. Looking back, it seems slightly naive. The language of rights seems to run counter to today’s language of austerity. But the economic and moral case for learning entitlement is just as powerful as it was five years ago.

Most people would agree that children should go to school or college and emerge at 18 with the basic skills and knowledge (roughly Level 2) needed to be an active citizen. It is a short step to accepting that the state should fund those first years of learning. If it is against the law not to be in education or training then the state should surely pay for it.

And if people leave school or college without Level 2, is that their fault? How can they manage in today’s complex society and increasingly complex job market? So the obligation on the state continues, hence the Inquiry’s idea of a general, lifelong, legal and financial entitlement, roughly to Level 2. As with the NHS, the argument was that it should be free at the point of use. Loans or an insurance model inevitably deter the most disadvantaged and add needless cost.

Beyond Level 2 it gets more debatable, hence the idea of a transitional entitlement, to be triggered at different ages, to cope with difficult times, such as a new job or new direction. Sadly, this was an idea before its time; a casualty of austerity. But other countries have similar models. In Denmark, workers receive little redundancy pay but much more generous entitlements to retraining at any age, with largely preserved wages. Our UK system of a legal entitlement to small lump sums of redundancy pay is much less effective at helping workers cope with job change.

What about the theory? Five years ago we thought the language of entitlements would strengthen choice and motivation. People are more likely to use something if they feel entitled. Rights remove stigma.

That is certainly true of union learning. Union learning representatives were given statutory rights in 2003 to paid time off, to discuss learning needs with their members, to carry out surveys and to meet with employers. Those rights have been invaluable. Today there are 30,000 union learning reps helping a quarter of a million learners every year. The language and reality of entitlements matters.

But how can we take forward the idea of entitlements? One idea is to create a personal learning allowance (PLA). Many organisations are discussing something like this, including the Workers’ Educational Association, unions, the Labour Party and, of course, NIACE. But government is wary of anything that looks like Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), a programme that was badly handled and had to be withdrawn. But the ILA programme survives and flourishes in Scotland and in a different form in Wales. In thousands of companies (including the Army) employees are entitled to some kind of learning grant. Sometimes this is linked to employer aims or to continual professional development. Very often it is also open-ended, allowing employees to pursue their own ideas, as at Ford. There is already fertile ground for the idea of a similar general adult entitlement.

A PLA could be a grant or an entitlement to a tax rebate on learning. A grant would help those who don’t pay tax but a tax rebate is essentially the same idea. Adult learners could use it to help to pay higher or further education fees. There might be conditions attached, such as limiting it to courses which lead to recognised qualifications. Employers are already entitled to such tax allowances which add up to almost £5 billion per year. Switching just 10 per cent of that funding would create a £500 million PLA pot. Already, HE or FE students are entitled to a subsidised loan – so learning entitlements for adult learners plainly work already. Calling for a PLA is not fanciful idealism.

In fact, it makes hard-headed economic sense. Every political party and most employers recognise the vital need to improve skills. The question is, how? Increasing apprenticeship numbers is part of the answer but the existing workforce need training too. People want training on their own terms, training of their own choosing. Giving everyone a real entitlement, with financial help, provides both an incentive and a sense of ownership. The Inquiry was right.

Tom Wilson is Director of Unionlearn and was an IFLL commissioner
Recommendation 4: Engineering flexibility: a system of credit and encouraging part-timers

Claire Callender

This article addresses Schuller and Watson’s fourth recommendation on ‘engineering flexibility’. They propose moving quickly ‘to a coherent system of credits as the basis for organising post-compulsory learning’ which allows ‘lateral as well as vertical progression’. Schuller and Watson also suggest that employers should ‘integrate the training they offer into a credit framework’. They make various recommendations about funding too, calling for the ‘funding for learning (both fees and student support)’ to be ‘mode-free’ so that it does ‘not discriminate against part-time provision or part-time students’. In addition, the funding should be ‘credit-based’, rather than related to a specific qualification. Finally, Schuller and Watson argue for ‘much greater fairness and consistency in the funding of further and higher education’. Sadly, hardly any of these recommendations have been achieved, at least not in the manner envisaged by Schuller and Watson, despite the policy rhetoric of ‘students being at the heart of the FE and skills system’ and the HE system. The exception perhaps is that now some employers are more involved in lifelong learning following the expansion of apprenticeships. Overall, though, there is little evidence of any commitment to the notion of flexibility in lifelong learning strategies or in policy developments over the past five years. Indeed, some recent policy changes have made the system more inflexible, with part-time undergraduate study declining and access becoming more restricted.

Schuller and Watson suggest that a flexible and coherent system of credit accumulation is indicative of whether a system is learner-centred or not – it is essential for choice. Progress on this in England has been slow with the three frameworks grouping qualifications into the same levels from entry to Level 8: the National Qualifications Framework (NQF); the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF); and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). The 2011-revamped QCF enables credit for smaller achievements and allows employers (mostly large ones) and practitioners to contribute to the content of the framework. However, the QCF is limited to vocational qualifications outside the HE sector and is not particularly well integrated with HE or professional qualifications (and those in the schools sector). In England, there remains no official articulation between the QCF and the HE framework. Consequently, in practice, the QCF does not facilitate credit accumulation and transfer arrangements between vocational qualifications and HE institutions, or the progression of learners between the QCF and the FHEQ. How can a genuine credit-based qualifications system be developed when only some types of qualification are included? Consequently, despite various promising reforms, England still lacks a coherent and nationally recognised system of credit accumulation and transfer in post-compulsory learning.

Schuller and Watson argue for more part-time provision to meet people’s ‘complex living and working patterns’ and changes in funding to promote this. Since they wrote Learning Through Life, the funding of lifelong learning in England has been reformed, but not in ways they could have anticipated. Here we focus on the effects of these funding changes on part-time undergraduate HE. Have they encouraged more people to engage in part-time study and promoted more part-time provision?

In 2012–13, first, the government withdrew most of the money it gave universities for teaching undergraduate students. Second, so that universities could recoup this lost income, the cap on undergraduate tuition fees was raised to £9000 a year for full-time undergraduate courses, and to £6750 for part-time courses. Third, students qualified for government-funded student loans to cover all of these higher tuition fees, including some part-time students for the first time. The terms and conditions of these loans are broadly similar for both full- and part-time students. Loan repayments and the interest charged are based on graduates’ earnings, and graduates pay nine per cent of their annual income over £21,000 until they have repaid their loan, with any outstanding debt forgiven after 30 years.

So, in keeping with Schuller and Watson’s recommendation, the funding for learning has become ‘mode-free’ with regards to tuition fees and part-time provision. Institutions now are being ‘funded for part-time students on the same basis pro-rata as full-time students’. However, student financial support is not ‘similarly even handed’ because part-timers...
remain ineligible for any financial help with their other study and living costs, unlike their full-time peers. It is assumed that, because part-timers are employed, they can afford these costs.

The early impact of these changes has been disastrous for the part-time sector and part-time students. Following the 2012–13 reforms, part-time tuition fees doubled or sometimes trebled. Between 2010–11 and 2013–14 the number of UK and EU part-time undergraduate entrants to HE institutions and FE colleges in England fell by 46 per cent (Oxford Economics, 2014). The student groups most affected were those: aged 55 and over; with low-level entry qualifications or none at all; and studying a ‘bite-sized’ course – less than 25 per cent of a full-time course. All these groups fall within the widening participation agenda, and suggest that access to part-time HE is becoming more unequal.

The reasons for these falls in demand are numerous. First, student loans are unattractive to part-time students. Loan take-up of just 20 per cent has been far lower than predicted, suggesting that loans are not necessarily perceived by would-be students as an adequate safeguard against the risks of part-time study, and with good reason. The justification for student loans is predicated on the financial returns of HE and other private benefits, and the idea that those who benefit financially from HE should contribute towards its cost. Yet, research shows that while the non-financial and public benefits of part-time HE are high, the financial returns tend to be lower than those experienced by younger graduates of full-time study in terms of earnings growth and employment opportunities.

So, prospective part-time students’ concerns about taking out a loan may be well founded. The costs of studying part-time may outweigh the financial benefits, unlike the costs of most full-time study. Secondly, the loan eligibility criteria are far too restrictive. Only about a third of prospective part-time students are eligible for these loans. This is mainly because most already have a HE qualification which is higher or equal to the qualification for which they intend to study, and therefore are disqualified from receiving a loan. The same rule applies to potential full-time students too but it particularly disadvantages part-timers because of their different educational backgrounds. As significantly, it inhibits lateral progression, promoted by Schuller and Watson. Consequently, these potential part-time students wanting to re-skill have to pay far higher tuition fees up front, and out of their own pocket.

The unwillingness of would-be part-time students to take out a loan or to pay high tuition fees for an uncertain return is not surprising. Part-time students are older and have family and financial responsibilities and obligations such as children and mortgages. These financial commitments are likely to take priority over part-time study costs when
experiencing financial pressures, especially in times of economic hardship or uncertainty. Discretionary and non-essential spending, including spending on study, is likely to be squeezed. And for such people, an additional nine per cent marginal tax to repay their student loan may well be unaffordable. Macroeconomic conditions, therefore, have a greater impact on the demand for part-time study than for full-time study, and part-time study is far more price sensitive. Put simply, now part-time study is just unaffordable for many potential students because of higher tuition fees and changes in student financial support.

These outcomes bring into question the suitability of student loans and their eligibility criteria for part-timers. Basically, they ignore the characteristics of part-time students. Loans are not designed for the ‘average’ part-time student with little disposable income who is likely to be in their mid-30s, has small children, is paying off a mortgage, is already employed but has yet to reach their peak earnings capacity. Instead, they are designed for young people who enter HE straight from school and who, on graduation, enter the labour market for the first time.

The drop in demand for part-time HE undergraduate study is only part of the story of the demise of the part-time sector. At the same time, there also has been a fall in the supply of part-time programmes. The part-time undergraduate market is more volatile than the full-time market and demand more difficult to predict. It is more costly and risky for HE institutions to provide part-time courses than to offer full-time courses. A funding system that does not discriminate between part- and full-time provision means that there is little incentive for providing part-time courses. Higher education institutions that can recruit full-time students will continue to do so rather than fill their places with riskier part-time students.

As demand has fallen, universities are closing down part-time courses. Between 2010–11 and 2012–13, the largest declines in part-time entrants were in undergraduate courses leading to vocationally-orientated sub-degrees and shorter modules/courses leading to institutional credits, many of which are continuing education courses. This has been particularly pronounced among the most prestigious and research-intensive universities. Higher education institutions are exiting the market for study below the Bachelor degree level, ceasing to offer institutional credit for short courses of study, and focusing their part-time undergraduate provision on Bachelor degree courses. In part this is because of the terms and conditions associated with the receipt of the new student loans. Only students registered for a qualification are eligible for loans, but those seeking additional credits without pursuing a Bachelor’s degree are not. As a result, the system has become less flexible and opportunities for credit accumulation are declining rather than expanding.

Such course closures mean prospective students’ opportunities to study part time and their choices of what and where to study are actually being restricted rather than broadened — again, contrary to Schuller and Watson’s aspirations. Such a narrowing of options particularly affects part-time students because their work and family commitments make them far less mobile than full-time students. They usually attend their local HE institution (if not studying via distance learning). So when local part-time courses close, the door to HE also closes. All these developments are a very long way from Schuller and Watson’s vision of engineering flexibility through a system of credit and encouraging part-timers.

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Recommendation 5: Improve the quality of work

Ewart Keep

Learning Through Life’s fifth recommendation, on the need for a stronger policy focus on how skills are used, remains important and topical. Predominantly, policy, especially in England, has continued to obsess about skills supply (mainly in relation to young people), and has simply assumed high demand for skills and their effective deployment once created. The reality is very different.

The latest data we have on over-qualification in UK workplaces paints a bleak picture. The OECD’s 2013 adult skills survey demonstrated that, out of 22 countries, the UK had the dubious distinction of the second-highest level of over-qualification in its workforce, beaten only by Japan. Some 30 per cent of workers indicated a mismatch between the qualifications required to get their job today and the qualifications which they held. What is even more alarming is that employers themselves are aware that their workers have skills that they are not using properly. Questions in the UK Commission for Employment and Skills’ Employer Skill Survey, which elicited employers’ views on whether segments of their workforce are over-skilled or over-qualified for their current job roles, indicated that, in 2013, UK employers believed that about 16 per cent of their workers had under-utilised skills.

These depressing figures exist within the context of a set of wider challenges facing the UK economy and labour market – youth unemployment, falling real wages for many workers, under-employment, new forms of casualised employment relationship, lack of employee ‘voice’ in the workplace, the adoption of transactional rather than transformative employee relations policies and practices in many businesses, and a poor record on productivity. There are also major problems with job quality and low pay (which have been reviewed in previous issues of Adults Learning).

From the perspective of the individual student or worker, weak opportunities to deploy skills and knowledge have a range of negative impacts:

- Over-qualification generally carries a wage penalty, which can be long-lasting.
- Work that is repetitive, has short job-cycle times and where employee discretion is limited, is often dull and does not engage the worker in what they are doing. Employees are unable to realise their full potential.
- Work that allows limited discretion and room for decision-making and creativity is more stressful and can pose serious physical and mental health risks.
- In many large UK organisations, creativity and innovation are the prerogative of senior management, while creativity on the part of others, if it disrupts established one-best-way models of operation, is a disciplinary offence. Research suggests that even more junior managers (for example, retail store and café managers) are unable to make even small, incremental changes in products or processes, as these are determined in minute detail by head office.

From a public policy perspective, investment in education and training is often producing weak returns (in terms of increased wages or boosts to productivity) because the skills that the taxpayers’ investment has created are not being mobilised to maximum productive effect, and are often being wasted.

As Learning Through Life noted, how the workplace operates influences how well employees’ skills are used. Workplaces that are configured in ways that allow people to innovate, and to use their skills well, are also likely to offer rich learning environments. In other words, there is a virtuous circle in operation, wherein the manner in which work is organised, how jobs are designed and structured, how work processes are configured and people managed in performing them, all have a profound impact on the volume, depth, breadth and overall quality of informal workplace learning (i.e. learning that is embedded in the inherent challenge encoded in the productive process), and how those skills are then used to productive effect. Elsewhere in Europe, broader models of workplace innovation policy are built on this understanding, while in England innovation policy still means hard science, R&D and knowledge transfer involving a small technical elite rather than anything that comes from the bulk of employees.

Even more unfortunately, from a UK policy perspective, the European Survey of Working Conditions demonstrates that the incidence of the kinds of workplace configuration and management style (labelled ‘discretionary learning’ by researchers) that are supportive of higher levels of innovation, skill acquisition and usage, are very unequally distributed across the EU. The UK scores better (about
35 per cent of employees in workplaces with these characteristics) than some Southern European countries, but on the whole it finds itself lagging a long way behind the Northern European leaders: the Netherlands (64 per cent), Denmark (60 per cent) and Sweden (52.6 per cent). By contrast, the UK has the highest proportion of employees of any EU country in workplaces characterised by some form of ‘lean production’ (40.6 per cent) – a model that carries with it far lower levels of opportunity for learning and for innovation.

Moreover, figures suggest that opportunities for organisational learning are very unequally distributed across the UK workforce in terms of differences between managers and workers. The UK scored third from bottom out of the EU 15 (behind Portugal and Italy) on levels of learning inequality (calculated by dividing the share of workers engaged in discretionary learning by the share of managers in that category, and subtracting the resulting percentage from 100). The three best-performing countries on this measure were (from the top) Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands.

These findings underline the scale of the challenge that UK policy makers now face in trying to configure workplaces and working practices in ways that can match those found in some of our high-innovation, high-productivity international competitors. We are in this mess because poor skills utilisation is, in large measure, a symptom of much more deep-seated problems with how too many UK organisations seek to compete, how they specify and choose to deliver the goods and services they generate, and how they organise work and design jobs to enable this to happen. This suggests that skills utilisation policies need to integrate different policy agendas (for example, science and innovation, economic development and business support, tackling low pay, and improving the overall quality of employment relations) to create a mutually re-enforcing suite of policies that can over time help propel a larger proportion of organisations onto high-road competitive strategies that would provide a demand ‘pull’ for more skills, better people management, more expansive forms of job design and greater workplace innovation.

In terms of policy development, what has actually been happening across the UK to address these issues? The leader has been Scotland. In 2007 Scotland embarked upon the development of a skills policy incorporating radical new elements, particularly seeking to address the ineffective utilisation of skills. Having looked at workplace innovation support in Finland, the Scottish Government decided to task the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) with establishing a series of pilot projects on skills utilisation, whereby colleges and universities could deploy their expertise with selected employers to help facilitate better usage of skills.

The result was the funding, from 2009, of 12 action research projects, selected by the SFC through a competitive tendering process. The call for bids was formulated to be as open as possible in the sense that the funding council held no predetermined model of what a skills utilisation project might look like, and there was an expectation that as these were experimental ‘proof of concept’ tests, some projects might not develop as planned, or deliver the intended outcomes.

The programme was genuinely exploratory in nature, and, from the outset, the skills utilisation projects were seen as a means of finding out what worked (and what might not) through action research.

The projects are extremely varied in nature, ranging from some that follow a fairly traditional model of seeking to better match course content and skills developed to what employers need (an employability-plus agenda), to a business-development and knowledge-transfer focus, while others aimed to help employers re-think production processes and re-design work organisation and jobs. Some were managed by a single college or HEI and others involved consortia of HEIs, colleges, or HEIs and colleges.

The Scottish Government has also been pressing on with efforts to raise the profile of skills utilisation issues, not least within the public sector via inspection, objective setting and performance review systems. At the same time, the SFC is now exploring how it can help colleges and HEIs to ‘mainstream’ the lessons gleaned from the skills utilisation pilot projects.

In Wales, the government is just embarking on two sectoral skills utilisation pilot schemes (in construction and the creative industries), and is thinking about what else might be done. In England, the ticking policy parcel has been handed to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, and has taken a back seat to their work on employer ownership. The main hope seems to be to find ways to promote the wider adoption of high-performance work practices, though how this is to be achieved is hard to see. Given the UK’s productivity problems, and the mounting social and economic cost of ‘bad jobs’, it seems clear that, sooner or later, skills utilisation and workplace innovation are going to become more prominent in the policy agenda.

Ewart Keep is Chair in Education, Training and Skills, at the Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, Oxford University
Recommendation 6: Construct a curriculum framework for citizens’ capabilities

Ruth Spellman

The Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) was closely involved in the development of Learning Through Life and played an important role in disseminating its recommendations. Although a formal citizens’ curriculum has been hard to pin down, it has become central to our provision. Improving digital skills, helping people take control of their own health and wellbeing, developing numeracy skills for everyday life and encouraging people to take an active role in their local communities are all reflected in our own course themes of employability, health and wellbeing, community engagement and cultural studies. Implementing the curriculum has, in many respects, been the easy bit. Agreeing what a written curriculum should look like is more challenging.

With an ageing population, and increasing health and financial inequalities, along with disengagement with the political process, the notion of a citizens’ curriculum is as important as ever. It reflects a holistic whole-life approach to learning, not just training for work – something the WEA and the other Specialist Designated Institutions have been doing for decades. From the Ministry of Reconstruction’s review of adult education following the First World War through to the Leitch review of skills and the Richard review of apprenticeships, we have continually called for and implemented a comprehensive approach to learning.

The evidence of the impact of this approach can be seen in our students. A typical example is Melrose Logan, who took part in a WEA Tandrusti health course. It not only improved her health through better diet and exercise but also helped her develop the confidence to volunteer in her community and eventually get a full-time job. This interlinking of skills is something we see every day and has transformational impacts on the lives of people across the country.

Underpinning the curriculum, we also have to emphasise the need to develop capability. What use is information if people are not able to understand and interpret it? The need to develop capability was true before the digital age and will be the case as society adapts to a changing world. The ‘four Cs’ of critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity are now key twenty-first century skills and need to be brought into thinking on the curriculum.

At its heart, a citizens’ curriculum is about responding to the needs of students and their communities. Our experience has taught us that flexibility is key. Courses need to be tailored according to the requirements of students in order to be effective.

For example, our eastern regional team recently developed a digital inclusion initiative with Sainsbury’s, through which WEA ICT workshops are held at store cafes. The course has enabled many local residents to improve their basic digital skills and become immersed in the digital world. For those who feel disconnected from their local community, it is an invaluable way of re-establishing old networks and making new ones.

A crucial element of the course is that it enables students to learn at their own pace. This personalised approach gives students greater motivation as they can control their own learning.

A citizens’ curriculum has the potential to be the framework by which we can help to address the UK skills deficit and reap rewards for individuals, our society and our economy. But it must be flexible enough to respond to local need and it needs a fundamental re-evaluation of how courses are funded. Like NIACE, the WEA also sees introducing personal skills accounts and more support for informal learning as essential to creating a citizens’ curriculum because it is only then that students can develop the different competencies they need at their own pace.

These are significant challenges, but ones which we should continue to seek to address for the sake of individuals, families and society.

Ruth Spellman is Chief Executive and General Secretary of the Workers’ Educational Association.
**Recommendation 7:** Broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce

Jim Crawley

When *Learning Through Life* was published, none of its contributors could have anticipated what the next five years would hold. The government’s austerity measures, and its far-reaching reform of the education sector, have created a challenging environment for everyone working in the field of lifelong learning.

Funding for adult skills has fallen by 35 per cent, while the requirement for teachers in the sector to be qualified was removed at the recommendation of the Lingfield report (only having been introduced in 2002). Research provides evidence of how the sector’s workforce has continued to be undervalued and how managerialist and performative approaches still dominate among employers. More expansive and employee-centred philosophies have gained little apparent traction across the sector despite strong evidence of their potential value and impact. The hard-won parity with teachers in schools, achieved through Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills legislation, still exists, but it has not had the desired penetration into the workforce and its future after the closure of the Institute for Learning is uncertain. The training, support and continued development of other ‘intermediaries’ working with lifelong learning sector professionals has also suffered through funding cuts, and the already diverse and varied nature of the workforce and the sector continues to mitigate against the development of a uniform, confident and outward-facing professional identity.

On the evidence seen, the pathway towards achieving recommendation seven, to ‘broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce’, has been obstructed by significant challenges and barriers. Despite this hostile and difficult environment, there is still evidence of some forward movement. More than 80 per cent of the teaching workforce now hold or are working towards a teaching qualification. The newly revised and simpler professional standards have helped providers of initial teacher training and CPD to incrementally redesign, upgrade and update their programmes, with more genuine control over that process than was possible during the previously managed changes in 2007. This was helped by practitioner consultation and development funding from the now defunct Learning and Skills Improvement Service, and there have been some innovative approaches to the curriculum addressing workforce development by providers from across the sector.

As Lingfield published his report in 2012, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published evidence that teacher education was having a positive impact on the teaching workforce, and that this was beginning to suggest positive impacts on teaching, achievement and teacher professionalism. Grades from Ofsted for initial teacher education have steadily improved over 2012–13 and 2013–14, and the work of the sector’s teacher educators has been mentioned in positive terms in a recent Ofsted report on teaching, learning and assessment in further education. The number of union learning representatives has continued to grow and the range and scope of the learning they are supporting has increased. The University and College Union, in collaboration with other sector stakeholders, leading academics and workforce practitioners, has done some excellent work on developing the notion of ‘democratic professionalism’. The central argument for democratic professionalism is that a more engaged, activist, collaborative and connected approach will support professionals in and across the sector in working together, building alliances, taking action and gathering confidence in ways which will empower them, and develop a more positive and unified professional identity and image than has previously been the case.

The five years since the publication of *Learning Through Life* have, therefore, been a journey down a road which has been obstructed, blocked and, at times, almost barricaded against the sector’s workforce. Somehow, and with all credit belonging to the spirit and perseverance, resilience, imagination and professionalism of the sector workforce, there has been forward movement of note along that road. For the next five years, to maintain and enhance the gains which have been made, and to reduce the impact of further barriers, the workforce of the sector needs to become ever-more actively democratic. Seeking out and grasping opportunities to build
confidence in small steps, working together in a more outward-facing manner with other groups, and engaging more directly and on equal terms with employers on the basis of strong evidence and success stories are all essential components of this process.

If we can become more ‘connected’ professionals, able to design the future rather than being trapped by the present, we will continue to make progress towards recommendation seven.

Jim Crawley is Senior Lecturer and Teaching Fellow at the School of Education, Bath Spa University

**Recommendation 8: Revive local responsibility...**

Keith Wakefield

Five years ago, *Learning Through Life* identified an ‘over centralised’ system as one of the biggest barriers to having fit-for-purpose skills training. It described how training was insufficiently linked to local and regional needs, how a ‘one size fits all’ approach was holding back our learners and depriving our local economies of the skilled people they need to grow. Half a decade on, not much has changed, but there is a wider agenda around the UK’s cities that wants to make sure skills and training are better tailored and more relevant to local need.

I sit on the cabinet of Core Cities UK, a group of 10 UK cities which are lobbying for change to England’s over-centralised and unbalanced system of government. We believe that a combination of fiscal independence from Whitehall and radical public-sector reform can help our great cities achieve their full potential. Boosting skills and jobs is high on our agenda. We know that without good people our cities will not grow and talent will not flourish.

It’s important to remember that our cities are already contributing their fair share to UK plc. England’s core cities deliver 27 per cent of the country’s wealth and more than 16 million people live in Core Cities urban areas, a third of England’s population. Our research indicates that the eight English Core Cities alone could, given the right financial freedoms, generate £222 billion and create more than 1.1 million jobs by 2030. That’s roughly the equivalent of adding Norway’s economy to that of the UK. But we can only do this if we make sure that our city workforces are full of trained and skilled people.

At Core Cities we know that a local approach works. Take the government’s Youth Contract. The Department for Education’s national evaluation, published in the summer, indicated that national providers had managed to get 28 per cent of young people into education, training or employment in the first year of the programme. However, where local councils delivered the programme – including in my own city of Leeds – the figures were much higher, at 69 per cent. This is because we know our area, we know our labour market and we know the skills shortages we face.

It’s tempting when talking about Core Cities to imagine that we all have the same set of issues in common. But training and skills demonstrates how different places can be. For example, the picture in Cardiff is completely different from Bristol, largely due to employer need. That’s why we want to move to a more demand-led system with good intelligence about the current and future needs of a city labour market.

Local government needs to support businesses in creating more and better jobs. We need to get people out of unemployment and into jobs, and we need to enable greater in-work progression so that people can move out of low pay. We have to work closely with employers to ensure training meets their needs, now and into the future.
We need to get people out of unemployment and into jobs, and we need to enable greater in-work progression so that people can move out of low pay. At the moment our training programmes operate semi-independently of employers, turning out people who may not be able to find a place in an increasingly competitive labour market. What we need to do is link them both up, working closely with each sector to make sure that the training we commission and offer meets a business’s needs now and into the future.

We believe each city should have the option of a minimum five-year Skills and Labour Market Agreement (SLMA) with the aim of moving more people from welfare to work. This SLMA should include a framework for coordination for colleges and schools, a single plan and investment framework with devolved budgets from government and advice and guidance services linked to large employers and growing sectors. Through SLMAs, Core Cities will undertake to work with Local Enterprise Partnerships and other local businesses to build a commissioning framework – removing duplication, increasing skills and reducing dependency on public services.

We will also set hard targets, to reduce skills shortages and gaps, increasing the number of apprenticeships as well as those with a minimum NVQ Level 2 qualification.

And we will press for widespread reform of the Work Programme: we want cities to be able to commission the programme, and to have a single performance framework across all 10 Core Cities. The Work Programme has the potential to contribute an average of £134.4 million to the UK through tax benefits and could create a further £195.6 million in benefit savings per annum.

Greater freedom for England’s cities could help deliver some of the aims of Learning Through Life. This is about creating opportunity and reducing the burden on the tax payer. It is about unleashing talent and making sure our great cities, and the millions who live in them, fulfil their potential.

Councillor Keith Wakefield is Leader of Leeds City Council and Core Cities cabinet member for Employment, Skills and Welfare.
four nations each have a named minister who is responsible for adult skills and learning, there is little, if any, trace of planned co-ordination at ministerial level, and established connections between civil servants have become steadily weaker as devolution has proceeded. While there are some marked policy similarities – for example, part-time adult learning has been heavily cut in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in recent years – this is more because of shared views on the relative priority of adult learning at a time of recession.

Among providers, the picture is more comforting. There is certainly a well-established ‘home nations’ system of networks and institutions in higher education, and this is reflected in the co-existence of the UK-wide Universities Association for Lifelong Learning with a lively Scottish UALL. More broadly, NIACE has a major presence as an umbrella association in England and Wales, while the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland (FALNI) brings together the larger provider bodies, and two organisations – Scotland’s Learning Partnership and Learning Link Scotland – play a leadership role north of the border.

This is not to suggest, though, that all is hunky-dory among the providers’ organisations. NIACE and the Scottish organisations have suffered cuts in income in the past few years, and this year the Scottish Government withdrew funding from Adult Learners’ Week; budget cuts have cost Northern Ireland the Workers’ Educational Association, Ulster People’s College and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults.

My experience in a number of UK-wide bodies, including UALL, is that few meetings reach the coffee break without someone muttering about the numerical dominance of the English. The demographic asymmetry of our four nations means that genuine dialogue involves a lot of work, and a lot of tolerance. Moreover, as further policies are devolved, and the institutions edge steadily down slightly different national pathways, so the space for easy dialogue shrinks.

So I don’t think we have seen much progress since 2009 in creating coherent national strategies across the four nations, nor in bringing together the different players effectively within the four nations. That is partly because policies are slowly developing in different directions, not least because closely related policy areas, such as employment and health, are also largely devolved. Coherent strategies that bring together very different government departments across four different administrations are simply not on the agenda, at least not at present.

On the other hand, there is surely much to be learned from dialogue and from each other’s experiences. In Scotland, for example, the experiment of involving learners in policy development is surely worth watching. And while much may diverge, there is a great deal more which is common to us all. The rise of MOOCs, the rapid development of social media, the explosion of digitised information, the growth of citizen science, the persistent problems of inequality and exclusion, and the challenges and opportunities of an ageing and diverse population are surely experiences that we face together – as we do with colleagues and partners in other parts of the world. Rather than vainly seeking coherence, then, it might be better to accept a degree of messiness and try to advance the common interests of learners in a chaotic and dynamic world.

“...If the UK seems to present a reasonably coherent face to the outside world, I can see very little consistency internally. Although the four nations each have a named minister responsible for adult skills and learning, there is little, if any, trace of planned co-ordination at ministerial level, and established connections between civil servants have become steadily weaker as devolution has proceeded...”

John Field is Chair of Scotland’s Learning Partnership and Emeritus Professor at the University of Stirling. He was a commissioner on the Inquiry.
Recommendation 10: Make the system intelligent

Mark Ravenhall

At this time of year I am always reminded of the words of a researcher who was looking at participation. It was mid-noughties, about the time the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning was getting going. The researcher was based at the European Social Fund and I rang up to ask how many adults were participating in learning programmes on the ESF. After a considered pause, and much consultation with colleagues, I was told that they could not tell me precisely as ‘it is like counting blowing leaves’.

Blowing leaves?

The reason was, he said, that on the ESF at that time ‘beneficiaries’ and their ‘outcomes’ were often not defined in terms of learning – it was all about getting a job, or being healthier (so you could get a job). Besides, adults tended to come on and off courses as part of ESF programmes in a way that made it difficult to count.

I finally got a figure, of course. A conservative estimate – based on what the ESF could count – was around a quarter of a million adults. I’m not sure that this number ever appeared in the official stats.

Blown leaves.

What was great about Learning Through Life was that, among other things, it attempted to count the blowing leaves. It took the time to analyse systematically the state of the nation in lifelong learning. In this, it was unusual on a number of fronts: one, it was about the whole of lifelong learning and not the component parts it is often broken into, largely for administrative convenience; two, the nation was the UK and not its ‘components’; and three, it talked about a system rather than a sector, and recognised that we engage with that system in different ways at different stages in our lives. It also talked about funding, which is always interesting.

The tenth recommendation was about continuing this good work and, by and large, it is not something we have lived up to. Although there continues to be a lot of research about parts of the system, there is little about the entirety. To paraphrase E.M. Forster, we might see it steadily, but we do not see it whole.

There has been no State of Learning report, as Learning Through Life recommended. This report, the Inquiry suggested, should be published every three years and include ‘statistics on participation, expenditure and achievement, together with information on innovation and capacity’. There was even mention of linking with Public Service Agreements, which were blown away on the cold winds of austerity.

Part of the problem undoubtedly has been the cuts since 2009. NIACE, the sponsor of the Inquiry, was hit by the meltdown of the Icelandic banking system. But in England at least the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has continued to fund R&D in adult learning – often to the envy of our colleagues across Europe.

But is state-sponsored research the same as an independent state of the nation report? Since 2009, the imperative in government has been to fund support for research into existing policies and programmes. Increasingly, this has been evaluative, with a strong emphasis on making current policies work, rather than asking whether they were good ideas in the first place or how they affect other parts of the system (the one that springs to mind here is the introduction of income-contingent loans in further education).

There are exceptions, of course. NIACE’s annual participation survey continues to define learning in a way that embraces its informal, non-formal and formal aspects – the way it is in the real world, in other words. And this is interesting when set against the findings from the employer surveys undertaken by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (the ones that tells us that most employers don’t invest in training their staff). And I know NIACE is doing some work looking at this alongside research from CEDEFOP and the OECD. But all of this is still rooted in ‘education and training’ in the way Learning Through Life was not.

Part of the problem is the compartmentalisation of policy making. Since Ed Balls’s time we have seen the parts of the system pulled apart like Lego bricks, in England at least. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) could be seen as a noble attempt to join up ‘children’s services’. But, on the other hand, it created a bifurcation in the funding system between young adults (particularly those with high needs) and adult learning. Important initiatives like family learning have continued despite these changes not because of them. In looking hard at one
part of the system, we have neglected other parts – arguably those most important to people on the ground.

To analyse the disconnect between departments is a thesis in itself, and is particularly important at times of cutbacks. This is because the lack of joined-up policy making is wasteful. Think of the costs of administering the UK-wide Work Programme (Department for Work and Pensions) alongside the adult skills programmes in four devolved nations. This is not to argue the system is wrong – necessarily – but that someone needs to look at it as a whole.

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Such an analysis could bring in another aspect of recommendation 10 where there has been some progress. NIACE has done much work on the social return on investment in adult learning, led by Emily Jones, Penny Lamb and the econometrics report by Daniel Fujiwara. There is also the Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL) project that includes work in Finland, Germany, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, Slovenia, Spain, Czech Republic, Serbia and the UK. There are any number of lonely, disconnected reports sitting on the shelves of think tanks, university departments and government agencies.

What is lacking is the will to see the system as a whole. There is even the feeling – a little like Margaret Thatcher's view of society – that there is no such thing as a system. But that depends if you see the system as planned or emerging naturally. My favourite paper that contributed to Learning Through Life was the one on local learning ecologies. That paper has the most resonance with me when visiting learning providers; it tells me that what we do in adult learning has a broader impact and that there are collaborative leadership implications because of this.

You can look at collaborative provision run in a local care home on dementia awareness. It is led by the local FE college, the attendees come from the NHS, or private sector carer agencies, or from voluntary agencies. They are cooks, occupational therapists, carers, nurses, volunteers. There is an impact on their work lives, their personal lives – many have elder care roles at home – as well as people suffering from dementia. This is a learning programme that led to dementia-friendly cutlery, cups, even toilet seats; the sort of impact that is invisible if you analyse the system by its constituent parts, or merely by outputs like qualifications.

I think there is an increasing recognition of the need to see things both steadily and whole. The recent State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty, led by Alan Milburn, gives an indication of how this might be done and presented to people. The current NHS Five Year Forward Plan engaged a wide range of players and support – and is generating a serious debate about longer-term funding. There has been the RSA's City Growth Commission – and other work on systems-wide leadership of place. All give glimpses of a way forward.

Perhaps now is the time to start counting those blowing leaves.

Mark Ravenhall is Chief Executive of the Further Education Trust for Leadership
The vision of Learning Through Life was broad and generous, but the wait for an inclusive, resilient and imaginative lifelong learning strategy fit for the twenty-first century continues, writes ALAN TUCKETT

Major reports on the education of adults cannot only be measured by their short-term impact. While the 1919 report of the Ministry of Reconstruction led to an expansion of provision, particularly by local authorities, it remains a key reference point for anyone making the argument that adult learning is a key foundation stone of an educated democracy. The Russell Report, published in 1973 – the year I started work full time in the adult education sector – was shelved by Margaret Thatcher, but its focus on ‘disadvantaged adults’ helped set the agenda for a generation of adult educators who campaigned for national programmes for the right to read, introduced English for Speakers of Other Languages, sought equal access to high-quality provision for adults with disabilities, and insisted on gender equality in participation. They also overhauled the adult curriculum to make women less invisible and promoted education that was alive to difference and diversity.

Like the Russell Report, the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education’s report of 1984 suffered from being commissioned under one (Labour) government and delivered under another (Conservative) one. Its key recommendation was that there should be an independent national development council for what was then called adult continuing education – with a budget of £1.500,000. What the government offered instead was a £50,000-a-year Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (ACACE), with an agenda to be agreed with government. The Tomlinson Report, Inclusive Learning, was met with bewilderment by the Further Education Funding Council when it was first published, yet has had a profound impact on how further and adult education is organised. Meanwhile, the key finding of the Kennedy Report, that ‘if at first you don’t succeed, you don’t succeed’, remains true for too many adults today.

It is important, then, to avoid overhasty judgements on the impact, five years on, of the independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning that NIACE commissioned while I was Chief Executive. Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel frustrated that such an impressive report failed to secure the serious policy engagement that it deserved, despite the warmth of response to it by politicians on both sides of the Commons and by practitioners.

NIACE was prompted to mount the Inquiry following the findings of a wide consultation, ‘The Big Conversation’, in 2006. This identified a serious lack of coherent policy thinking on lifelong learning. It came at the end of a bruising four-year period, in which the expansion of adult learning opportunities seen during the first Labour government was eroded and overturned by an increasingly narrowly focused policy, perhaps most simply summed up in Alan Johnson’s call for ‘plumbing not Pilates.’ The Institute’s board decided to spend one million pounds of its own reserves to facilitate a wide-ranging and independent review. We persuaded Sir David Watson, then Professor of Higher Education Policy at the Institute of Education, and a distinguished former vice-chancellor, to chair it, and appointed Tom Schuller, the head of the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, to lead it, backed by a team of NIACE research and administrative staff.

By the time Learning Through Life was published in 2009, the Inquiry had published 30 separate studies on aspects of policy. Each makes interesting reading, and some offer exceptional contributions. But it is the main report that has attracted the most attention. It contained two significant innovations: the work calculating the total learning economy in the

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UK, and the proposals to segment the adult life-span into four periods – up to 25, 25–50, 50–75 and 75-plus – and to re-balance the total investment (whether from public or private sources) attributable to each, to secure increased investment in the later years. At the heart of the four-ages critique was a recommendation, if not a demand, that the collection of data on learning and skills should not stop at the end of the conventional working life at 64, but should be fully lifelong.

Both innovations attracted interest. The Commission for Employment and Skills cited the work on the learning economy in its overall skills policy review, and used a modified version of the methodology to produce updated figures, interestingly omitting tax relief for money spent on development by self-employed workers. However, there has yet to be a shift in thinking at the Office for National Statistics. One proposal which has been picked up in a modified form is the Mid-Life Career Review suggestion developed by Stephen McNair, who was part of the Inquiry team.

Other than that, the rich analysis that underpins the proposals on a citizenship curriculum based on capabilities (digital, financial, health and civic – I lost the argument for including culture), the arguments for improved quality of work, for a strengthened credit system, for a better-trained workforce, and for an intelligent system, has joined the plethora of well-argued proposals generated since the Second World War – valued more obviously by decision-makers in Hungary or Canada than in England.

In part, the reason for this can be laid at the feet of the bankers, whose excesses triggered the 2007–08 recession. An inquiry begun in good times (you could say like Russell and ACACE before it) reported when confidence and bold judgment was in short supply. In part, too, the timing of the report’s appearance, nine or 10 months before a general election, meant it arrived too late to affect the major policy work that informed the party manifestos, and too early for the fresh thinking any new government would need to undertake. In addition, its focus was broad, at a time when the bulk of post-compulsory education thinking at the Office for National Statistics.

Perhaps Learning Through Life lacked enough detailed engagement with the institutions through which so much post-compulsory education is undertaken. The absence of detailed recommendations about what colleges, universities or community centres should do was, I recall, a conscious decision. But it did mean that when the central political machine failed to engage sufficiently with the report, there were fewer practical measures for institutions to take forward in the meantime, and it was easier, too, for vested interests to ignore the report’s challenges.

The largest failure, though, was in dissemination. It certainly sold well, shifting in excess of 2000 copies in the first months. But sales are only one measure of success. We should, on reflection, either have held back perhaps a quarter or more of the budget to ensure that the ideas were as widely promoted as they deserved, or we should have raised significant additional funds to undertake that work. As it was, Tom Schuller and his colleagues did an impressive range of presentations within the limited budget available, and NIACE extended its budget for the work by another quarter million, despite the increasingly difficult economic context affecting it alongside all kinds of other adult learning bodies.

Notwithstanding these caveats, Learning Through Life remains the single most impressive piece of work generated by NIACE during the time I worked there. The breadth and generosity of its vision reads as freshly today as when it was first written. Many of its ideas are there to be recycled and adapted for changing circumstances, and its core proposal, that learning is a human right to which everyone, throughout their lives, should have access, is one that NIACE and all who work with adult learners should properly endorse. Meanwhile, we continue to wait for government to adopt an inclusive, resilient and imaginative lifelong learning strategy fit for the twenty-first century.

I think, too, looking back, that the Inquiry’s thinking on work and the labour market failed to engage with or sufficiently excite the attention of major employers, of training agencies, awarding bodies, or of individual trade unions, despite its endorsement of Lorna Unwin’s powerful analysis of the need to foster expansive rather than restrictive workplaces.

Alan Tuckett is President of the International Council of Adult Education. He was Chief Executive of NIACE when the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning was commissioned in 2007.
As the contributions to this special issue of Adults Learning attest, Learning Through Life, the ground-breaking report of the NIACE-sponsored Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, has been an inspiration to many in the sector, as well as a major challenge to government and providers.

As David Hughes notes in his commentary, you don’t have to look far to see the influence the report has had. The Mid-Life Career Review, which has provided more than 3000 adults aged between 45 and 65 with access to a review of their future options and looks set to become a permanent part of the education landscape, is one legacy of the approach set out in Learning Through Life.

The Citizens’ Curriculum being developed by NIACE is another which we hope will make a real difference to the learning lives of adults. Whether you are concerned with the development of the lifelong learning workforce, the quality of skills or the need to ‘restore life and power to local levels’, the Inquiry’s vision of ‘a society in which learning plays its full role in personal growth and emancipation, prosperity, solidarity and global responsibility’ has continued relevance.

Despite its enduring relevance, however, it is clear that we are some way from meeting all the challenges set out in the report. As Claire Callender, for example, argues, we are no closer to the flexible, credit-based system envisaged by Learning Through Life. In fact, in some respects, we are moving faster in the wrong direction. Nowhere is this more evident than in higher education where the government’s funding reforms have led to a dramatic decline in part-time student numbers. We know how crucial this sort of learning is to our economic success – the benefits have never been better understood and there is broad understanding of the demographic challenges we face and the role of learning and skills in addressing them. Yet, as Karen Evans puts it, some ‘historic gains’ in adult participation in learning are being eroded.

Keith Wakefield makes a welcome call for adult skills and local growth strategies to be better joined up, something NIACE wholeheartedly supports. The Inquiry was particularly prescient in proposing a revival in local responsibility and in its criticism of what had become an ‘over-centralised’ system, ‘insufficiently linked to local and regional needs’. The coalition has acknowledged this and made some welcome moves in the right direction. There is growing agreement that we need increased investment in skills and that there must be considerable local influence.
over how it is spent. The development of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) is an opportunity here. But, all too often, LEPs and local authorities do not take a sufficiently holistic view of skills and economic growth, developing separate strategies when there is a clear need for greater joining up. As David Hughes has argued, we need a three-pronged approach here: LEPs and local authorities need to understand and signal what skills are needed in their areas; learning providers and employers need to ensure the right courses are offered that develop those skills; and people need to be persuaded to increase their skills and take up loans available to them. Getting this right is vital for our cities and for our country.

The latest government data on adult participation in learning, which highlight the very low take-up numbers for adult learning loans, also demonstrate how far we have still to go. In 2012–13 more than 400,000 people aged 25 and over participated in learning at Levels 3 and 4. However, in 2013–14 only 57,100 adults paid for their Level 3 and 4 learning with a loan. Loans have also had a significant impact on apprenticeship starts, where there has been a fall in the last year of more than 66,000 in advanced apprenticeships and 900 in higher apprenticeships. Evidently, this is all profoundly damaging not only to individuals but also to employers and the economy. As Ewart Keep argues, as an economy we face major challenges concerning productivity and workplace innovation. We need more (and different) individuals to develop their skills through training and we need more employers willing and able to utilise those skills. As we argue in our manifesto, Skills for Prosperity, we can no longer, as a society, afford to allow people to stagnate in their careers. We need to ensure people have the right sorts of opportunities to learn, at every stage of their lives.

One of the key concerns of Learning Through Life was with the lack of a coherent national strategy for lifelong learning. It called for a single department with ‘lead responsibility for promoting lifelong learning, with cross-government targets for lifelong learning’. The case for greater coherence is as strong as ever, yet, as John Field argues, we seem no closer to achieving it. That is why we take this key policy aspiration forward in our manifesto. We call for greater coordination at the heart of government, specifically for a single UK department responsible for education, skills and work, bringing together schooling, further and higher education, as well as the welfare-to-work policies of the Department for Work and Pensions. This new department, we argue, should develop a national, integrated skills and industrial strategy to support what we term a ‘new localism’ which ‘integrates skills with economic growth strategies and provides leadership through LEPs and combined authorities’.

To inform the new department’s work, our manifesto also calls for a major, independent review into the long-term skills needs and funding issues facing the UK over the next 20 years, to report by 2018. The reasons for this are obvious. We have had a decade of remarkable and ongoing change, including change to the demographic make-up of society and technological changes which would have been unthinkable a generation ago. We know that improving skills is crucial in responding to these challenges, and in realising the potential of all our people. Yet, while we should be spending more on skills and learning, investment by employers and the state is reducing. The wider benefits of lifelong learning are well-recognised yet participation is declining. Meanwhile, we have seen multiple reviews of policy areas and wave after wave of reform, doing little to bring coherence across the piece. We desperately need a review that will help develop a coherent and sustainable policy and funding system for skills after the age of 18. We believe that through a four-nation, cross-party commission we can deliver a long-term settlement for skills and learning which supports occupational up-skilling, re-skilling and lifelong learning.

NIACE’s vision is of a truly lifelong learning society in which all adults have opportunities to learn and benefit from their learning at all stages of their lives. We want to see the learner more in control of the learning they do, supported by career review and co-funding from the state and employers, channelled, in the spirit of Learning Through Life, through personal skills accounts. We want a new learning culture across the country in which all citizens have opportunities to learn throughout their lives. The next UK government, we believe, should recognise its role in forming a new social contract that enables and encourages investment in skills for adults of all ages to benefit our economy and society. Our aim is the same as that of the Inquiry and its inspirational final report: to set an agenda for lifelong learning that makes sense for our times.

Tom Stannard is Deputy Chief Executive, leading NIACE’s work on policy and strategy.
NIACE Training Courses

Demonstrating Impact for Quality using RARPA: 1-day training
Thursday 9 December 2014, London
9.30am–4.00pm

How to use Reading for Pleasure to support adult learning and skills: A one-day workshop
Wednesday 10 December 2014, London
9.45am–3.45pm

E-learning tools for English and Maths teaching: One-day training
Friday 9 January 2015, Leicester
9.45am–3.30pm

How to be a Functional Skills teacher: A one-day workshop
Thursday 15 January 2015, London
10.00am–3.30pm

Using social networking to improve adult literacy: A one-day workshop
Thursday 22 January 2015, Leicester
9.30am–4.00pm

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Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning: Research into Practice
Edited by Christine Wihak, Joy van Kleef and Judy Harris
September 2014
£29.95

This handbook consolidates the major research findings of experienced recognition of prior learning (RPL) researchers from around the world, identifying future research directions and drawing together evidence-based implications for policy and practice.

Learning to Make a Difference: Student-Community Engagement and the Higher Education Curriculum
Juliet Millican and Tom Bourner
November 2014
£24.95

Of equal importance to international academic and community audiences interested in learning partnerships, this comprehensive guide presents the latest thinking and innovations in development and professional practice in student–community engagement – an area of increasing interest and value to higher education institutions and communities alike.

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