

## **Power to the People?**

Our learning and skills debates are about spending public money and getting value for it. We subvert the difficult question of what constitutes such value by lining up a series of oppositions; young people versus adults, skills acquisition versus lifelong learning, non-accredited versus accredited learning, qualifications versus the rest. The state uses these to decide what it will and won't fund, to show that public money reaches those who need it most, providing an erstwhile guarantee of quality in delivery and outcome. These oppositions are often flaky, insufficiently distinctive, and the value of the outcomes far from satisfactory for adults. And adult learners are without a voice or any influence in the reform of the system.

Credit Works' reports for LSC, referenced recently in the TES, identified failures in the system below level 2 for adults and recommended ways to address them. The unpalatable truth was that the system was failing far too many of those in most need.

LSC adopted most of Credit Works' recommendations, and their willingness to test provider capacity to respond to a new and different set of entitlements for adults in the FLT is heartening.

Learner entitlement has meant marking out those who could have subsidised access to circumscribed, publicly funded learning. Whether this was what they wanted or was any good was another matter. But the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT) is now testing a different concept of entitlement for adult learners.

By 2010 all learners without level 2 qualifications will be entitled to have their achievements recognised in the Qualifications and Credit Framework; to personalised learning which reflects their interests, abilities and choices; to a coherent and progressive learning experience: one which leads somewhere the learner needs to go (rather than where the provider is able to drop them off).

At last we are testing a system which creates a subtle profile of learners' achievements over time, redefining qualifications quite differently from the unwieldy offers we have now and which will - when learners get the hang of it - lead to new and different demands being made on providers, and systems that providers have to deal with. Achievements in the FLT can count in one step towards qualifications in the QCF - no more preparing learners to be ready for qualifications, sometime next year, sometime never.

Given the Delphic value Leitch attributes to OECD performance tables, the position of qualifications as a success measure looks assured. But the QCF offers the chance to learners and employers to exert more influence on the content and design of qualifications - redefining what constitutes valuable, useful and successful achievement.

Adult learners will need skills and confidence to gain control of their own learning and achievement and to demand what they need instead of taking

what they are given. Those who don't pay have the least say – making these new entitlements work in the FLT will be a real test of how far the system really wants learners to exercise such rights.

Providers will need to know that reform of the system gives them access to the right products. The focus of public funding must be sharp enough to recognise which learners most need public funds. Clumsy categorisation and cross-matching of adult learners, provision and qualifications is not enough.

Learners could at last be given the means to exert direct influence, challenging embedded interests and helping the push towards a "demand-led" system, working with policy reform from the top, to lever change from the bottom up.

The impact and influence of introducing these entitlements could outlast successive administrations and the efforts of any single Government.

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