

# Lifelong Learning and Further Education- Steps towards The Good Society

## Proposals from Compass

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Compass believes that the time has come to re-assert the social value of learning in helping to bring about the three inter-related educational goals of a good society:

- Economic growth and advancement
- Social inclusion and democratic empowerment
- Personal growth and the increase of autonomy.

To achieve this we need to think holistically about the kind of education system we need. We argue for a cradle to grave system of lifelong learning, funded fairly, to enable everyone to realize their potential and to develop at the pace that suits them. We call for a shift of power and resources away from Whitehall with greater local democratic accountability. We argue for the creation of local education plans and for local scrutiny committees to be turned into Local Education Boards, representing all the stakeholders, charged with ensuring the accountability of publicly funded education providers to their communities and to parliament.

Our focus in this paper is on further education and adult learning, as a key component of a lifelong learning system, one that serves the needs of millions of young people and adults each year, most of whom are working class, but that suffers from a combination of neglect and meddling. We make recommendations for improving provision for young people, for apprenticeships and skills for work as well as a new focus on citizens learning networks and a citizens' entitlement to learning as a core component of adult and community learning.

Our concern throughout is to ensure that education contributes to the building of a more equal, inclusive and sustainable society, and that its management at every level reflects our commitment to a more democratic and collaborative order. This will require a series of cultural shifts particularly to the status that we accord to vocational education. It means recognizing the importance of education that:

- promotes social justice and cohesion
- develops skills for work
- opens up opportunities for young people who have not chosen the A level route to university, and 'second chance' adults
- offers learning throughout life and a critical understanding of the world to help people to both shape as well as adapt to change in their own lives and the reality around them – to use learning to create a more just society.

For Compass, all these purposes are equally important, as are the values that underpin them. We want a more coherent, democratized and collaborative lifelong service; one that that delivers fairness; planned and delivered locally, guided by a national policy framework. It is this vision above all which defines the distinctiveness of our approach.

## **Lifelong learning**

Given the permanence of social and economic change, almost nobody can expect to be qualified for life or equipped for changing roles and contexts solely through their initial education. Yet for all too many, especially those whose initial education was not a great success, opportunities cease when they leave school. Those who do find opportunities are more likely to do so through a college of further education or a training provider. Both of these suffer from unequal treatment compared to other institutions, their funding usually the first to be cut in times of economic hardship, forced to chase the latest government whim. Their natural inventiveness has been stifled as has their capacity to respond to local employment priorities though they are exhorted to do so.

Lifelong learning is a key ingredient of national well-being in a democratic society, potentially providing the intellectual tools for every citizen to participate critically and positively in shaping a better future for us all, challenging narrow-thinking, prejudice and cynicism that threaten our democratic institutions. The challenge to our planet must urgently be combatted through public awareness and action. Sustainability is one of the values on which Compass's proposals are based. Not just ecological sustainability but our capability to manage and shape society in a sustainable way.

*'Learning through Life'*<sup>1</sup> has set out a strategy we endorse, particularly those measures that put learning power into the hands of disadvantaged learners through local democratic planning and through financial entitlements, such as the now almost discarded Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Lifelong learning, equally importantly, can bring joy, friendship, self-esteem. Room must be found for *'Seriously useless learning'*<sup>2</sup> as well as the utilitarian agenda that has been increasingly the focus in recent decades.

Rapid advances in digital technology can dramatically accelerate progress towards an inclusive lifelong learning system providing there is a shift in values within education to recognise and support those measures that allow digital technologies to promote a more inclusive and democratic society. Without such shift, digital technology will be yet another of the divides between the 'haves and have-nots'.

### **Strengthening the local dimension – planning and accountability**

To achieve a lifelong learning system that contributes to The Good Society, Compass advocates redefinition of roles and responsibilities for educational planning and accountability with a decisive devolution of responsibilities and resources to democratically constituted bodies and an end to the government micro-management that has characterized recent years. We propose:

- The secretary of state will lead a re-unified education department and a single funding agency for a coherent cradle to grave lifelong learning service. The secretary of state will create a national framework of educational priorities, standards and entitlements, guided in this work by a new body – an independent national education council for pedagogy, curriculum and qualifications that draws on expertise and research and leads national debate about the purposes and priorities of education and training.
- Local democratic governance will be strengthened: Compass proposes local planning for an integrated lifelong learning service overseen by Local Education Boards (LEB). Local plans will focus on local needs within a nationally agreed broad framework. These boards will provide strategic oversight of planning (analogous to health and well-being boards) and hold service

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<sup>1</sup> NIACE, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Seriously Useless Learning: the collected TES writings of Alan Tuckett with an introduction and narrative by Ian Nash, NIACE 2014

providers, including councils, to account. Crucially they will not deliver services, thereby retaining impartiality and integrity. They will enjoy statutory powers and the hallmark of their operation will be collaboration. LEBs will replace local scrutiny committees which will be wound up.

- The size and composition of LEBs will reflect local conditions and where possible will shadow the boundaries of Local Enterprise Partnerships with whom they will work closely. Membership will be widely based representing many interests: local elected councillors and their senior officers, along with representatives of interest groups who will form the majority of the Board. Groups such as education and student unions, governing bodies, head-teacher partnerships, colleges of further education and employers will be amongst those represented. Further details of the roles and responsibilities of these proposed arrangements can be found in another appendix to the Compass/NUT Inquiry in *'Local Education Governance- improving the service and holding service providers to account'* Martin Yarnit, Compass November 2014<sup>3</sup>.
- Ofsted's role will be reformed to oversee national and locally agreed standards, support local improvement initiatives, offer HMI support and wisdom, moderate peer reviews, carry out area reviews, conduct subject reviews to monitor national standards and to identify and share successful practices. Peer review - self-evaluation externally moderated (the accepted practice of higher education) - will be developed operating to a schedule agreed by the LEB and a framework set by Ofsted. Staff from other schools/education providers will form part of teams responsible for school/provider inspection and improvement, with Ofsted inspecting the operation of local plans and some providers.

### **Skills for employment and apprenticeships**

Poor skill levels undermine economic vitality as well as holding back the life chances of 'the so-called forgotten 50%' (more than 50% in fact) of young people and their adult counterparts who hope to follow a vocational route. NIACE predicts in its October 2014 'Localism Prospectus' that *'our economy will have 13.5 million job vacancies in the next decade but with only 7 million young people entering the labour force in that period, we are heading for a major labour market imbalance. Tackling the skills and employment support needs of UK adults is therefore now a pressing economic necessity.'*<sup>4</sup>

Too many employers in Britain think training is something the government should pay for, an attitude too long reinforced by government policies such as the Train to Gain programme. Leitch recognised this in 2006<sup>5</sup> arguing that if employers were not training 50 plus per cent of employees, then licence to practice should be introduced. Government is not powerless to change employers' attitudes and practice but needs to have the will.

Countless government reports and initiatives have been to little avail. Policy changes are required to create coherent progression pathways for individuals and to change the practices of employers:

- License to practice (which covers twice as many employees in the regulation-averse USA) should be greatly extended
- Government contracts with major companies should include provision of apprenticeships and other forms of training

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<sup>3</sup> Access to Local Education Governance doc to be inserted

<sup>4</sup> 2015 Localism Prospectus, NIACE, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Leitch review of skills, DfE. 2006

- Tax incentives such as those Richards proposed in his apprenticeship review<sup>6</sup>
- Vocational strategies to be a required component of industrial strategies
- Local Enterprise Partnerships (in conjunction with Local Education Boards) required to develop a vocational plan for their area- these are some of the policy changes that would help
- Much improved and impartial careers information, advice and guidance must be re-instated, particularly for those contemplating following a vocational route.

Whilst we support much of the Husbands report on apprenticeships<sup>7</sup>, we do not endorse his proposal that employers be given responsibility for resources and qualifications. Research indicates that most do not want this. Only the largest have the capacity to participate fully and they already have considerable influence. Finding a rationale approach is not helped by the plethora of organisations that complicate the field: BIS, the Skills Funding Agency (that now includes the National Apprenticeship Service), the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and Ofqual. To simplify the processes and make them more cost-effective:

- We propose the development of a single lead agency for skills and employment that can work confidently with large employers, group training associations, small and medium enterprises.

Apprenticeships deserve a particular mention – with all the main political parties offering them as the preferred solution to skills development and greater parity of esteem with academic routes. How realistic is this vision? We fear it is not at all. With only 7% of young people pursuing this route, often due to shortage of apprenticeship places, and with recent (Nov 2014) provisional government figures showing an overall 13% decline in places in 2013/14 (compared with 2012/13) within which the greatest fall was in the 25+ group where starts fell by 29%, much more must be done. Too few apprenticeships are based on rigorous or expansive learning, on and off the job, too narrowly focused on skills for specific roles, lacking in under-pinning theory and generally too short in duration. The measures set out earlier should help in stimulating demand and a positive response by employers. We endorse the German model of longer, more rigorous apprenticeships. Many further education colleges and some training providers have an excellent, if largely undervalued, record in providing vocational education, including apprenticeships in partnership with local employers. Colleges currently account for a third of all apprenticeships according to a recent publication by the 157 Group.<sup>8</sup> We should aim to build on this kind of good practice.

We know from research that the vast bulk of adult training takes place informally within the workplace and that employers are not always good at either providing that training or making use of their talent pools. Externally provided training should, therefore, *‘assist employers to re-engineer their work processes in a manner that expands the range and quality of learning opportunities inherent in day to day routines, thereby improving training whilst producing more effective work processes’*<sup>9</sup> according to Keep and Mayhew.

We support the conclusions of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning<sup>10</sup> With its emphasis on a *‘clear line of sight to the real work context’*, the dual professional role of teachers and trainers who combine occupational and pedagogical expertise. We believe that the

<sup>6</sup> The Richard review of apprenticeships, BIS, 2012

<sup>7</sup> A revolution in apprenticeships: a something for something deal with employers, Husbands review of vocational education and training, Labour Party Policy review, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Future colleges- rising to the skills challenge, 157 Group, November 2014

<sup>9</sup> Moving beyond skills as an economic and social panacea, in Work, Employment and Society Vo 24, No 3, 2010

<sup>10</sup> It’s about work – the report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, LSIS, 2013

professionalism of teachers must not be diluted by the employment of untrained staff and that there must be a culture of continuous professional development. Learners, both young people and adults, require no less than school children – a fully professional workforce.

Few young people and even fewer adults receive high quality, independent careers education or guidance that would enable them to make the right lifetime choices and mid-life changes that would benefit themselves and the economy. We agree, therefore, with the Association of Colleges in their 2015 Manifesto<sup>11</sup> that careers education (deeper than guidance and advice alone) should be re-introduced into the school curriculum and local advice hubs developed (as proposed by the National Careers Council Report<sup>12</sup>). These should provide services to support the ‘mid-life career review programme’ that NIACE argues for in its 2015 Localism Prospectus.

### **Further education**

A crucial part of a lifelong learning framework is further education (FE), the least understood and appreciated part of our education system. It provides a lifeline for the 60% of young people who do not follow the A level route from school to university as well as a significant proportion of those that do follow it; skills for workers and the unemployed and a second chance for adults returning to learning later in life. The 157 Group of colleges draws attention to an impressive record: the sector trains 3 million people a year; as well as providing more than 30% of all entrants to HE, it delivers 85% of all Higher National Certificates and boasts an 85% completion rate – with around 900,000 FE students are working at levels 3 and 4. Colleges have increased their apprenticeship offer faster than all other types of provider. Many have offered high quality services to young people and adults with special educational needs, to those whose first language is not English and to the 1 in 5 adults whose levels of literacy and numeracy hold them back. In the last 3 years over 1 million adults have improved their literacy and numeracy skills and gained qualifications through the FE sector.<sup>13</sup>

Never funded equitably, FE has borne the brunt of recent cuts with far more predicted. Forced to chase any source of available funding to survive, it has become so diverse that it is hard for the general public to understand its purpose and value. Policy makers and politicians rarely have any experience of FE but that does not stop their endless meddling. Despite these challenges, FE benefits millions of young people and adults. It could do better still if policymakers and politicians stopped repeating some classic errors and nourished its potential for making us a better educated society, rooted in a shared sense of social justice. Compass believes that FE needs a fresh start if we are going to get on top of the twin problems that dog our system: the poor standing of vocational education and the inadequate skills of much of the working age population. So,

- We endorse the 157 Group in calling for stable structures, equal treatment (in funding and accountability), freedom to innovate and durable funding (a stable financial settlement within which to plan). All educational pathways and stages should be treated equally to bring about the ‘parity of esteem’ so often talked about in regard to vocational and academic education.

### **Young people**

The FE sector educates more 16 and 19 year olds than schools as well as, increasingly, the 14+ youngsters who schools are more than happy to hive off. Many of these young people get a poor deal from education- a significant and currently growing minority (referred to as NEETS- not in education or training) has abandoned education and training altogether. The grand vision of Butler

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<sup>11</sup> Manifesto 2105, Association of Colleges, Nov 2014

<sup>12</sup> Taking action: Achieving a culture change in careers provision, National Careers Council, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Future colleges- rising to the skills challenge, 157 Group, October 2014

in 1944 of a tripartite system, the third leg of which would '*concentrate upon producing the most highly skilled technologists the world can show*' was never realised as grammar schools became (and remained) the aspiration and technical schools never catered for more than 2% of the population<sup>14</sup>. The education system continues to reflect the elitism and priorities of the social system in its structures and its qualifications.

We broadly support the proposals from the Husbands inquiry set up by the Labour party to look at the future of FE, especially the notion of a unified National Baccalaureate with general and technical strands.

This will benefit the 60% (according to 2012 figures) who do not opt for A levels and university entry.

We support a package of measures designed to improve young people's employment prospects and to make it easier to navigate a bafflingly complex education and benefits system:

- At local level employment training plans must be set up for all young people with mechanisms to track the progress of NEETs and the unemployed. Excellent careers advice and guidance must be closely allied to local employment opportunities. These services must target those most at risk and publish annual reviews of their performance.
- A new maintenance allowance should be introduced for 16-24 year olds taking them out of benefit regulations so they can take part in workplace learning, community service and relevant study.
- The Future Jobs Fund should be restored, enabling private, public and not for profit sectors to participate.
- Community and voluntary organisations should be given a lead role in commissioning support for young people with targeted integrated case management for those most at risk who so often fall through the cracks.
- To increase our knowledge of what works we need to establish an anonymised database of cost effective interventions (as NICE do for the healthcare sector), with analysis and dissemination of best practice.
- Whilst these measures focus largely (and urgently) on young unemployed people, similar measures must be taken for unemployed adults.

### **Adult and community learning (ACL)**

Adult and community education has struggled to survive in the new, skills-focused world with the ACL fund frozen at a meagre £210m for more than a decade. Organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the more recently formed U3A and Unionlearn are amongst those trying to uphold the proud history of working class education dating back to Victorian times. Whilst supporting what these are doing, Compass wants to see the renewal of an invigorated citizens' learning movement, one that builds on the possibilities of social networks and digital learning to contribute to a stronger democracy and The Good Society.

### **Citizen's learning**

We support the creation of Citizens' Learning Networks through which people can develop critical thinking skills together and apply them to the many problems that beset them and, equally important, enjoy the sheer pleasure of '*seriously useless learning*'. Such networks (virtual and face to face) are likely to be autonomous and largely independently funded – new forms of mutual or

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<sup>14</sup> Butler speaking in a commons debate in 1944 as quoted by Tristram Hunt in his 2014 speech at Microsoft  
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cooperative organization drawing on public contributions in cash and/or kind from local authorities and other local bodies. A key characteristic of the Networks would be a relentless engagement with the big issues defined by ordinary people and through dialogue to identify principles, causes and solutions. This is what we mean by a citizens' curriculum. Their success would be judged by the extent to which they demonstrated the relevance of learning in enabling people to bring about collective action for social change. The Citizens' Learning Networks, whilst echoing earlier radical traditions such as the work of Paolo Freire in Brazil, must carve out a new methodology and develop a new following for learning with a social purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous examples from around the UK and the world can inspire: Brazil's 'Lighthouses'; Men's Sheds in Australia; Italy's 150 Hours project that secured 150 hours a year of publically supported education for workers; Learning Cities around the World (200 in China); Australia's Learning Exchanges; Leicester's 'Learning for the 4<sup>th</sup> Age' to name but a few. A modicum of funding could facilitate the development and coordination needed to establish and maintain these independent forms of lifelong learning. Citizens' Learning Networks could complement recent proposals by NIACE for a Citizens' Curriculum – *'a life skills/citizens' curriculum approach involves developing learners' language, literacy and numeracy skills in an interlinked way, alongside and within other life skills, which include health, civic, digital and financial capabilities.'*

Meanwhile ACL has provided a range of services that make a huge difference to people's lives and must be maintained and strengthened. There is growing evidence about the beneficial impact of literacy, numeracy and problem solving and adult learning in general.<sup>16</sup> The problem is that funding in England for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL (ALNE) has shrunk and access to free provision has been curtailed – all from a relatively low base. Also essential to the social justice agenda is family learning but that has suffered a similar fate. The 'long tail of under-achievement' which bedevils our society starts at birth and must be tackled in the early years. Research has shown that educational interventions that involve the whole family can make a huge difference not only to the aspirations and attainment of children but to the skills, confidence and ambition of their parents or carers. Family learning aims to support each family member to become lifelong learners. So what should be done?

Several measures would enable more people to enjoy the benefits of adult learning including:

- Re-establish a wider entitlement to adult learning regardless of age, employment or benefits status with a statutory entitlement to some programmes such as ESOL
- Support flexible, self-organised models of learning such as those described as Citizens' Learning Networks. Integrate digital literacies into provision
- Fully integrate ALNE into workplace and community contexts with fully trained professionals and volunteer support
- Invest strongly in family learning programmes, continuing to research best practices
- Improve guidance to enable individuals to orientate and help them invest through an approach built around reciprocity and mutual support rather than commercial loans.

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<sup>15</sup> For Freire (1921-97) the educational process is never neutral. People can be passive recipients of knowledge, whatever the content, or they can engage in a problem posing approach in which they become active participants.

<sup>16</sup> OECD PIACC Skills Outlook 2013, p. 240; Feinstein and Sabates (2007), Public Value of Adult Learning: Skills and Social Productivity at <http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/docs/Feinstein-Sabates12.pdf>

### **Professionalism.**

The achievement of our proposals for lifelong learning for a Good Society and the successes of learners depend, to a considerable extent, upon the FE workforce without whose high standards and personal commitment no policy can be successfully achieved. We are repeatedly told that teaching lies at the heart of success, yet the morale of the profession is low and conditions of service are such that it is increasingly difficult to guarantee high standards. We call for a professionally qualified workforce whose conditions of service prioritise continuous professional development (properly supported) along with parity of status, pay and conditions with other parts of the education workforce and equitable remuneration. The workforce should be engaged in local democratic decision-making through the Local Education Boards as well as within their institutions.

### **Funding**

The over-riding principles of funding lifelong learning and further education within it in a good society must be:

- Parity of access for all learners, in entitlement to grants and loans, with the right to take this up at whatever point in the life course is most suitable to the individual
- Funding according to need: greater at entry and foundation levels and for disadvantaged young people and adults.

In many ways the inverse is true and always has been though it has worsened of late. In recent years funding up to the age of 16 has been protected and this has significantly affected institutions such as colleges and work-based training providers whose population is almost entirely 16 plus. Funding of 17 year olds is 22% lower than that of 11-16 year olds and 18 year olds fare even worse. The ring-fence must be extended to 18 year olds in the first instance. Education Maintenance Allowance, a successful incentive and support system for the poorest learners has been replaced by a much smaller fund, despite evidence of its beneficial impact. Introduction of Advanced Learning Loans has had an adverse impact: in 2012/13 over 400,000 learners aged 24+ were engaged in levels 3 and 4 learning. In 2013/14 only 57,000 adults paid for their learning with a loan.

Throughout this document we have made numerous policy proposals relating to funding. In addition, we endorse the AoC's call for a 'once in a generation review' of funding needs and criteria for distribution based on the principles set out above. There is room for more entrepreneurial approaches to funding and numerous examples of success in raising funds in these ways, but this cannot mask the need for stable core funding. There must, moreover, be scope for the planning role of Local Education Boards to influence funding locally. Local decision-making will lead to better use of scarce resources.

### **Conclusion**

Traditionally, further education has been the Cinderella or the work-horse of the education system. Somehow regarded as inferior to higher education, partly because of the British disease of snobbishness towards vocational education and trades, the sector has also suffered from its complexity of purpose and structure.

But rather than resort to yet another radical overhaul, we propose instead a re-focusing of the sector around three challenges: skills for employment; the young people choosing not to follow the A level route to university (the so-called forgotten 50%) and the long-delayed shift to a lifelong learning system. We have suggested the changes to programmes and organisations required to facilitate this shift of focus. We have shamelessly drawn on others' ideas – a reflection of the growing consensus in this field – framing them within a distinctive vision of a coherent,



collaborative, democratized service designed to advance the cause of the Good Society. If further education is to flourish within a comprehensive lifelong learning framework, then it requires a clear statement of its public value and the values that should underpin it. That has been our task here.

*With much thanks to the very many colleagues who have contributed generously both time and ideas through seminars and email exchanges. Readers who are interested in further detailed analysis and proposals should contact [Judithmedwards1@btinternet.com](mailto:Judithmedwards1@btinternet.com) for further documents. Comments on this paper are most welcome and should be sent to Judith Edwards at this email address.*