

# Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning: Call for Evidence

November 2012

## A response from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) to the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning

### Introduction

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is the UK's leading independent, non-governmental organisation and charity for lifelong learning. The purpose of NIACE is to advocate on behalf of adult learners and to promote more, different and better learning opportunities by improving practice, policy and promotion.
2. NIACE welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence regarding the characteristics and features of excellent adult vocational teaching and learning. The views put forward in this response are supported by direct consultation with learners studying on apprenticeship frameworks, but also reflect NIACE's broader focus on improving teaching quality and empowering learners.
3. NIACE identifies the following key themes as essential components of adult vocational teaching and learning:
  - adults need a distinct approach that draws on their existing reservoir of experiences;
  - vocational learning has to be an education too;
  - listening to and engaging with learners to co-design the learning experience works;
  - employers are the best champions of a systematic learning approach for adults.

### Distinctive approach for adults

4. NIACE has argued, consistently, that learner motivation rather than qualification titles and funding arrangements determines whether or not a course is vocational. So, in that sense, good *vocational* teaching and learning should not differ significantly from good adult teaching and learning in general.
5. The focus on *adult* learners is, however, significant. While it is not necessary to advocate a full-blown theory of andragogy as distinct from pedagogy, it is evident that

adults are able to draw on a larger reservoir of experience than young people, and that adults tend to be more self-directed and autonomous than children.

6. In order to support people's continuing development beyond the life of the course of instruction, it is important to encourage people to learn informally and of their own volition, fostering a culture of lifelong learning, enquiry and reflection among students. This needs to be a central facet of the teaching and learning model employed by all those delivering vocational learning, particularly for adults.
7. NIACE recognises the central importance of comprehensive and impartial careers information, guidance and support so that adult learners can objectively assess their options and make informed career decisions regarding their futures. The need for impartial, high quality careers support is heightened by the fact that adult learners are increasingly expected to contribute towards the costs of their vocational teaching and learning opportunities.
8. Our conclusions are backed by research<sup>1</sup> that highlights a specific focus for vocational teaching and learning for adults takes into account the "nature of the vocational subject, the setting where the teaching and learning takes place, objectives and desired outcomes for a session, plus specifications of the qualification, the nature of the learners, their level and how they learn best including their learning styles."
9. In order to facilitate a distinctive adult approach NIACE recommends that:
  - the context for adults takes into account the unique set of circumstances that adults bring to a vocational learning situation;
  - vocational teaching and learning for adults should be delivered in a way that enables the rich experience and greater autonomy of adult learners to be consciously acknowledged in the design and implementation of programmes; and
  - vocational teaching and learning for adults should encourage the development of self organised learning opportunities, utilising technologies like social media networking in order to provide opportunities for adult learners to learn how to learn.

### **Vocational Teaching and Learning needs to be an Education too**

10. NIACE is clear that vocational education differs from vocational training in that it is broader and includes elements of critical self-reflection on forms of knowledge as well as the achievement of technical competences. The best vocational learning should provide people with not only the skills, but also the confidence and resilience to cope with changes in both work and society, and focus on preparing the individual to continue learning and adapting throughout their life and career.

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<sup>1</sup> Faraday, Overton and Cooper (2011) Effective teaching and learning in vocational education

11. This correlates with research on an expansive apprenticeship<sup>2</sup>. In order to operate effectively, vocational teaching and learning needs to be much more than a simple rote learning of skills that are directly relevant to a particular employer's operation, or even a particular sector, industry, trade or craft. There must be awareness that vocational teaching and learning needs to be broader than the technical skills required to perform certain operations in a work setting.
12. The 'expansive' model of vocational teaching and learning recognises a broader set of skills including English and maths, team building, entrepreneurship, innovation and communications and ICT.
13. In order to assist the development of vocational teaching and learning as an education NIACE recommends that:
  - the 'Expansive Apprenticeship' model is applied more generally to all vocational teaching and learning, particularly with adults; and
  - an agreed set of standards is developed that can be provided in addition to core technical competences for all vocational teaching and learning, building upon the contestable occupational standard model proposed by Richard in his recent review of Apprenticeships.

### **Listening to and engaging with adult vocational learners works**

14. NIACE argues for a greater emphasis on a process of co-creation of the vocational learning experience, particularly for adults. While employers know what they need from people filling particular job roles, taking account of the views and feedback of learners enriches curriculum design. It can help ensure that the learning is relevant and effective, that it addresses the aspirations of learners and helps them become more self-directed in their study, ready to continue developing themselves beyond the formal education programme.
15. Flexible support from both the learning provider and the employer is a vital component of effective vocational teaching and learning, especially for those learners who are most vulnerable and least likely to be retained in traditional classroom based education. This involves actively listening to and responding to the learners' needs in an imaginative and collaborative way, which enables the course structure to be adjusted to respond to

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<sup>2</sup> Fuller, A. and Unwin, L (2012) Creating and supporting expansive apprenticeships: a guide for employers, training providers and colleges of further education. [London]: National Apprenticeship Service. Available at: <http://www.isis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/CreatingandSupportingExpansiveApprenticeships.aspx> [Accessed 1 February 2012]

Fuller, A and Unwin, L (2008) Towards expansive apprenticeships: a commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. [London]: TRLP. Available at: <http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/apprenticeshipcommentaryFINAL.pdf> [Accessed 1 February 2012]

individual requirements wherever practicable. A willingness from the employer to consider adjusting working hours to accommodate varying needs, including the study time prior to exams, is well valued. More importantly, though, learners told NIACE that the interest and encouragement of tutors, mentors and coaches was vital to their success:

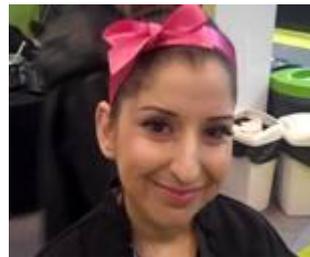
*“The tutor who came from college was fantastic – the best woman I’ve ever met. She was always available by phone or email.”*

16. NIACE supports developments in vocational adult teaching and learning that places the adult learner at the heart of their learning development, including enabling learners to gain vocational expertise even if not yet in the workplace, whether this be through practice firms or work placements. Our case study from Sarah at Bradford College highlights the effectiveness of this “real world” approach.

### **Case Study**

#### **Sarah, studying Nail Services at Bradford College**

Sarah is studying Nail Services at Bradford College. She has benefitted massively from the support and encouragement of her tutors, saying that: “I don’t think I could have got here if it weren’t for my tutors; they really pushed me forward.”



She also highlighted the importance of gaining genuine work experience while studying; the College has a salon in the city centre which allows students a chance to learn through interaction with paying customers. “It’s more real... we’re set a manager and allocated roles... so it’s more like what you’d find out in the industry.”



17. In order to support learners to be at the heart of vocational programmes NIACE recommends that:

- Mechanisms are developed to ensure that the self-organised learning potential of adult vocational learners is maximised;
- vocational learners collaboratively develop their vocational teaching and learning offer with providers; and

- flexible opportunities are developed for learning in real world situations.

### **Employers are the best champions of a systematic approach to vocational teaching and learning**

18. One of the key benefits which high-quality apprenticeships offer to apprentices is the chance to learn in a real-life employment situation. Learners value this ability to develop their skills and understanding while experiencing day-to-day processes, tasks and relationships involved in the workplace. Employer engagement is therefore vital to ensure that these opportunities are available and that the experience being gained is authentic.
19. In interviews, apprentices have consistently reported to NIACE that the opportunity to ‘earn and learn’ is valued.

*“I’ve had the time to develop my skills while being able to earn a living wage. My expectations for the future have gone even higher.”*

This opportunity will be particularly important to many adults aged 24+ following the introduction of Advanced Learning Loans for Further Education at level 3 and above. However, some learners have suggested that the apprenticeship wage is too low for adults with existing responsibilities to live on:

*“I found that because of it being an apprentice as an adult it’s really hard to live on the pay that companies can get away with, which is why I think adult learners tend to try and avoid (apprenticeships) because they simply can’t live on that little.”*

20. NIACE’s recently published: “Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study (June 2012)” identifies the following key points:
- employers should take a whole-organisational approach to literacy and numeracy provision and vocational teaching and learning more generally. This includes the development of an overarching literacy and numeracy policy aligned to their specific business environment, as well as an assessment of the literacy and numeracy profile of their employees.
  - employers should develop their awareness of the contribution that literacy and numeracy skills make to individual job performance and career progression within their business
  - employers should consider how best to offer timely literacy and numeracy provision that effectively engages learners and delivers sustainable skills, by working with providers to:

- offer literacy and numeracy provision that is contextualised to relevant vocational settings and specific organisational contexts, and that is managed to fit around business commitments and routines;
- maintain the use of discrete, intensive, literacy and numeracy programmes leading to a full qualification and, where appropriate, to basic skills profiles with a mix of levels linked specifically to job roles, entry requirements for technical training programmes and career progression; and
- provide greater focus on speaking and listening skills relevant to the specific needs of learners and their job roles.
- employers should consider using in-house, qualified literacy and numeracy specialists and networks of trained volunteer support in order to reduce over-reliance on externally-funded provision and provide greater flexibility in delivery.
- large employers should share effective approaches to literacy and numeracy skills improvement within workforce development, with other employers and with government, through an appropriate national forum, in order to inform national policy and practice.

21. NIACE recommends that:

- employers continue to support the development of meaningful and expansive apprenticeship programmes reflecting the Richard Review recommendations relating to the development of new contestable standards for each sector;
- employers recognise that a key element of their contribution to the success of all forms of work based vocational teaching and learning is the quality and flexibility of support that they make available to their learners through mentorship and other mechanisms;
- employers develop a series of clear progression pathways that show their prospective and existing employees what benefits they can directly expect to achieve if they successfully complete a programme of work based vocational adult teaching and learning. The 'value' of the programme should be clearly set out in terms of the increased earning potential that the learner should realise and the wider career progression that they could achieve too; and
- employers should learn from the experience of the Army in terms of embedding the delivery of English and Maths training in the services. The longitudinal study clearly demonstrates what needs to be in place in order for a programme of work based vocational learning for adults to be successful.

## **Case study**

### **John, studying Level 3 Waste Management with DHL**

John left school with no qualifications, but when he joined DHL he undertook some functional skills qualifications through their learning centre.



“That put me on track to say yes, I can do things. That’s how I got the role of taking the recycling job on and now [my manager is] pushing me ... to get my level 3 on the apprenticeship.”

All of the learning in the framework is linked to John’s work, and the tutor comes to the recycling centre each week to support his learning and record progress. John can see a clear progression route upon completion of the course, as he will be managing the recycling unit. He has also used his experience to encourage his colleagues into learning: “colleagues can come to me and talk to me about it and I can explain what they’re going to do on a course and the colleagues don’t feel afraid no more.”

## **Conclusions**

22. NIACE believes that our four key elements are crucial for effective vocational teaching and learning to recognise the unique contribution that adult learners can make to their learning.
23. We believe that by harnessing adult learners existing experience and capacity for self organised learning, vocational teaching and learning can be made more enriching and beneficial.
24. NIACE advocates that opportunities are available to all the key stakeholders in the FE system. By setting the learners at the centre of the vocational teaching and learning experience, there can be radical shifts in the power relationships between employers, providers and learners which can significantly enhance learning outcomes.
25. NIACE recognises employers must play a critical role in the development and delivery of effective vocational teaching and learning experiences for adults.

## **Case Study**

### **Jane, studying Level 3 Customer Service with Tesco**

As a Union Learning Rep, Jane had been encouraging colleagues at Tesco to undertake apprenticeships for some time before taking the plunge herself. She has found it helpful to reflect on what she learns through her work as a Tesco employee and shop steward for the union, saying that:



“doing the work and the modules and catering it to myself and my job- that’s what I’ve enjoyed.”

Jane has received vital support from her employer: “if there’s anything I’m unsure about I can just ask them... if I need any time off I can have it.”

Overall, she has found the apprenticeship experience to be a positive and affirmative one: “I would say that if anyone’s unsure, to just believe in themselves to go ahead and do it, because 9 times out of 10 you can actually do the work- it’s putting your knowledge down on paper.”