

## ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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### ***Skills for Sustainable Growth***

#### ***– A BIS consultation***

#### ***Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers***

***Date: 14 October 2010***

ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers through partnership and by lobbying.

#### **ATL policy**

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

#### **ATL response**

We welcome a focus on the development of skills and have long advocated that school curricula should present teachers with greater freedom to develop the skills young people need and not just impart centrally-prescribed knowledge.

Unfortunately, *Skills for Sustainable Growth* looks likely to lead to a skills strategy focussed intently on Britain's economy and not enough on Britain's learners and their varied needs and desires. We argue that the correct approach to skills development resets the scales that balance economic outcomes and educational benefits, and takes a holistic approach to education rather than concentrating on those that have already left, or are approaching the end of formal education.

The consultation paper sets out many principles which we can agree with, but ultimately fails to deliver on them and prioritises a need to service employers over developing passionate and successful learners.

### **Getting past education vs economy**

It shouldn't be this way – education and economics should not be mutually exclusive. The minister for further education, skills and lifelong learning is correct to assert the importance of learning in his foreword to the consultation paper: the content though somewhat fails to make this case.

The government's tunnel vision that FE is about skills for jobs to power the economy is mistaken in leaving behind consideration of the benefits, aside from work, of education. ATL believes that education is a societal need; it is central in the quest for social justice. Education and learning are in themselves sound ends and individuals benefit enormously. This can be seen through the social contribution most people will make and the personal fulfillment many will achieve.

As many people, with a stake in the system, believe the role of FE to be 'raising educational attainments among young people and adults' as believe the role is 'meeting local and national skills needs'. One in five, in the same Ipsos-MORI survey, said that the role of the FE system is to promote lifelong learning.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the minister tells us that, "By acknowledging the value of learning we can begin the task of re-evaluating our priorities, rediscovering craft, redefining community learning, rejuvenating apprenticeships, rebalancing the economy and building a big society."

Whilst recognising that education brings economic benefits to individuals and in turn the economy, we believe the government must make a greater case for education in proposing reforms with such an impact upon the FE sector. In better promoting a strong FE sector delivering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and more, the government will find that employer confidence in investing in training will grow. Too often education and business meet on the terms of the latter. By encouraging employers, the decision-makers, and managers to engage more in the training and learning their staff (be that apprentices or those employed on permanent full contracts) undertake, we can tackle the inability of firms to capture the benefits of investing in skills and the insufficient knowledge of learning opportunities and what the education sector has to offer.

### **Priorities and principles**

Despite the minister's rhetoric, *Skills for Sustainable Growth* immediately frames the challenge in economic terms. Productivity, international competitiveness, high performing business sectors, and preparing people for work instantly take hold as the foundations of the strategic aims. ATL has the distinct impression that we believe more in the importance of a redesigned skills system with 'the learner at its heart', as the consultation paper describes, than the government itself does.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ipsos-mori.com/emails/sri/latestthinking/aug2010/content/3\\_employment-welfare-skills-economy.pdf](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/emails/sri/latestthinking/aug2010/content/3_employment-welfare-skills-economy.pdf)

The complexity of student choice, local economies and UK skills needs to be disentangled strategically. Is the FE sector to be strategically placed to provide qualifications for the learner or for the UK economy? Is post-16 education and skills about learner choice or economic demand? It is essential for the skills strategy to have a strong educational core that allows the government to answer 'both' to these questions. They must be interlinked and education and learning is not simply a nice have alongside jobs and economic growth.

ATL does not believe that the policymakers and the FE sector have achieved a settled view on how qualifications, learner interest and need, and local and national economic needs, are to be coherently addressed. Clearly significant work has been done by UKCES and the Sector Skills Councils but – despite examples of great practice – we have yet to arrive at a comprehensive and coherent sector that can confidently deliver education, skills and training.

It is pleasing to see a respected, credible vocational training offer as a core principle for a skills strategy. We believe, however, that this is not just about apprenticeships. Beyond simply training, we advocate the provision of high quality vocational education in which the focus is not simply on training for a job, but development of the broader skills a young person needs in life and in their career, whether that is spent with one employer or twenty. Though its execution was highly dubious, ATL believes that the last government's ambition to offer a route for 14-19-year-olds that includes both vocational and academic study was sound. We will continue to emphasise the benefits of broad learning to the individual and society.

### **Do not separate skills from the whole scope of education policy**

A skills strategy must not just focus on those at or near working age. Rather, all education policy should be considering the development of skills. We are concerned that government is not 'joined up' in this regard and that the curriculum reviews that the Department for Education have planned will see a shift to knowledge-based learning at the expense of skills development.

#### ***Curriculum***

ATL's curriculum policy, set out in *Subject to Change*, says:

'ATL proposes a national curriculum model which starts with pupil needs and interests and is designed in terms of the skills and attitudes that we want pupils to acquire and develop.'<sup>2</sup>

Formal education should make a concerted contribution to developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions for young people to be responsible citizens and independent thinkers. Social skills should sit alongside learning skills and the skills needed to be functional in life, including literacy and numeracy. Moving away from a restrictive national curriculum and giving teachers the freedom to teach would help instil a love of learning. Pupils need to develop the skills and understanding to support lifelong learning.

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<sup>2</sup> ATL, *Subject to change: new thinking on the curriculum*, 2006

### ***Breaking the vocational-academic divide***

Education for 14-19 year olds must meet students' learning and skills needs. ATL does not believe that education for young adults will be equitable and meet the needs of all unless policy and political rhetoric can break down the false dichotomy between vocational and academic study. ATL's view is that the skills and knowledge associated with each are important and, suitable to their individual needs; young people should be engaged in both. For example, apprenticeships should not just be about the skills for a job, but skills for life, and about developing well-rounded citizens who can participate successfully in the workplace and in a society that benefits from their presence.

### ***Functional Skills***

Functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills, which cut across both academic and vocational teaching and learning, are also vital and can be key to the transferability of learning and experience. We await with interest the government's decision on the future of functional skills. Once again, we offer significant support in principle but dismay at implementation by the previous government.

ATL thinks it essential that functional skills qualifications do not suffer from being seen simply as a qualification for low-achievers. It is difficult for a qualification to become valued if it is battling for status from its introduction, and it is unfair for those students undertaking the assessment. The discrepancy of compulsion between GCSEs and Diplomas is at best inconsistent and at worst could lead to three tiers of qualifications with functional skills at the bottom.

### ***The example of Science***

The National Strategic Skills Audit<sup>3</sup> informs that 'teaching and research professionals across the education sector will be essential to support the supply of new recruits to a number of priority sectors,' going on to suggest that 'this will require close and on-going co-operation between education providers and employers to ensure that evolving curriculums effectively meet industry needs'. This is particularly true of STEM-related subjects. Support from industry in emphasising the importance of thinking and learning skills – which include the scientific skills of investigation, enquiry, analysis and evaluation – will help develop students capable of engaging in science through their education and their life. It should be obvious to business, especially at a local level, that this is beneficial to them; and worthy of investment in the form of time or money.

Integrating schools' science teaching with the local community can provide an excellent opportunity to drive interest in science in schools and ensure science is valued as important and an attractive route post-16. The encouragement of strong relationships between schools and employers is essential. This would ultimately lead to employers and individual scientists going into schools and colleges and students and teachers visiting workplaces.

In schools, scientists may join teachers in the classroom to play with materials, to excite pupils with concepts and questions, to lead

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<sup>3</sup>

[http://www.ukces.org.uk/upload/pdf/NSSA\\_Volume%201\\_FINAL\\_BOOKMARKED\\_110310.pdf](http://www.ukces.org.uk/upload/pdf/NSSA_Volume%201_FINAL_BOOKMARKED_110310.pdf)

demonstrations, or they may talk to students about their career, the application of their work and how they got to where they are. They may support teachers' development of scientific understanding. Local university students may do similar. In workplaces, students and teachers could make day visits to see the work going on in their area and students could undertake periods of work experience or longer, paid internships in the summer holidays could be developed. Each should be directly linked to what is taught in the classroom. We know that children learn best in relevant, everyday contexts. Making science seem close and real to students is essential – whilst these suggestions will be happening already around the country, the challenge is to encourage widespread practice and ensure relationships are lasting. Efforts should be exerted with employers in science-based industries and not solely prescribed to schools. Gender stereotypes around subject choice and science careers must be challenged. For this to have most impact, for it to be feasible in fact, it is necessary that the demands of the curriculum as it is currently exists are eased, freeing up time for teaching young people the skills they actually need to succeed in life within a light curriculum designed locally. What goes for science, goes for all industries, target skills, and taught subjects.

### **Apprenticeships**

ATL supports further investment in apprenticeships, which it believes are a valuable part of the educational offer to young people. This investment must not solely be about making pupils 'work-ready' nor dictated unquestioningly by employers' desires. They must support the apprentice's educational development outside of work too. We support an increased contribution from employers to fund apprenticeships but caution against expectations of undue influence over their development at a national policy level or in specific frameworks.

It is important that vocational education is relevant and so we agree that employers should have some input into apprenticeship frameworks. But there is a danger in employer-led bodies being left alone to develop these. The professional expertise in the education sector should not be dismissed when plotting either in-work or classroom-based learning as part of apprenticeships. Similarly to the rest of the consultation paper, the development of high quality apprenticeships omits a willingness to include learner voice. This can be crucial to adapting to the needs of the next generation of apprentices but also to understanding the support and development existing or recent apprentices felt was lacking.

### **Adult learning**

Unlike most European countries, in the UK the percentage of adults 24-64 participating in lifelong learning is declining.<sup>4</sup> ATL believes that adult education is an important, and underestimated, facet of our education system.

It is right to consider FE colleges as community institutions. As the paper highlights, adults access the education they offer for a number of reasons – for example, to give themselves a more positive experience of education, after bringing up children, or simply as a hobby. But we must

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<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/benchmarks\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/benchmarks_en.pdf)

also consider the positive effect adult learning can have on reducing cross-generational poverty cycles and aiding the next generation in enjoying a fulfilling education themselves. A parent who has not seen the benefit of education the first time around, but gives themselves a second chance, is much more likely to instill a love of learning in, and impart the importance of education to, their children.

For all of these reasons and in response to the stated intention that government's role should be 'to create the right conditions so that charities, voluntary organizations and social enterprises can play their part' in adult learning, ATL argues that government must provide funding. *Skills for Sustainable Growth* is good at setting out why and how adult education exists, less strong at understanding how to extend and support it. The ambition to do so runs counter to taking money away from the sector and we believe it is unrealistic to expect the third sector to fill the gaps, working with or without educational institutions. It is perhaps ironic that this is one of the few places that business and employers are not at the centre of the proposals. This despite the positive impact which Unionlearn has shown can be made on adult learning through the workplace community.

Some of the answers the government seeks are already there. Unionlearn successes in the last year include:

- \* 117,105 people accessed learning as a result of Union Learning Fund projects.
- \* 83 new learning centres opened as a result of ULF projects.
- \* 123 formal learning agreements have been signed between unions and employers.

It is not clear from the consultation paper exactly how lifelong learning accounts will actually work. The ambitions to facilitate access to IAG and childcare support, ease enrolment, and utilise social media are sound but there needs to be significant work done to comprehend how this can be done. This seems to be an idea at the very earliest stages of development and we will await with interest further explanation and discussion.

### **Information, advice and guidance (IAG)**

The accessibility of high quality, impartial information, advice and guidance to learners is critical. We recognise the importance of employers also being able to access such information, particularly when for many their awareness of learning opportunities will be weaker than many individuals'. It is worth reiterating that amidst the different types of learning to which the consultation paper suggests employers should have access, Unionlearn courses, training and skills development should be prevalent.

We are disappointed to see the need for provision of efficient and effective IAG couched in terms of a well-functioning market, rather than simply fairness or a realistic expectation that learners should be afforded. ATL has highlighted before<sup>5</sup> the importance that a holistic approach is taken to IAG that connects it with the curriculum and skills development. The sentiment of the Nuffield Review that young people must be taught to

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<sup>5</sup> 14- curriculum and its assessment – an ATL position statement, 2010:  
<http://www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policies/14-19-curriculum-assessment.asp>

develop the 'competence to make decisions about the future in the light of changing economic and social conditions'<sup>6</sup> is crucial and highlights the importance of decision-making skills alongside knowledge of the education and employment landscapes.

We think it is important to recognise not only that careers education must be impartial with regard to schools' and colleges' own provision but also that it should be impartial in reference to government's education initiatives, policy or those qualifications or progression routes in which Government feels it has a significant investment.

The issue of value is both significant and problematic. We do not believe that value judgments should be made on the different routes through education and learning that people take. But we recognise that the opposite remains a reality. Information, advice and guidance available to students must be able to tackle openly the status issues between different learning routes, whilst not undermining any particular route or qualification – thus allowing individuals to make informed decisions. If employers or educational institutions are failing to understand one type of qualification and favouring candidates with another, it is fair that students are made aware of this in such a way that they are not being guided down a particular route, but can avoid taking decisions that will have a negative effect on what they are trying to achieve. It is important that employers and universities, for example, are involved in the provision of advice.

ATL believes that careers education should raise aspiration, support participation in learning, help overcome inequality and assist in making goals achievable.

## **Accountability**

There is a disjoint between this BIS-produced consultation paper and the rhetoric of the DfE (plus, indeed, later sections of *Skills for Sustainable Growth*). The administrative burden of presenting information about the quality of colleges falls upon the FE sector itself to implement and maintain. Where the business world is given a boost to power and influence over frameworks and what is useful, the education sector is given bureaucracy to manage. We think this is a terrible waste of professional talent, expertise and enthusiasm. We note that information to aid learner choice does not appear to stretch to evaluating employers.

Questions over whether and how to hold colleges and other training organisations to account for their performance in responding to learners and employers needs and to prioritising training that adds real economic value need further exploration. From our extensive experience of Ofsted inspections in the maintained school sector, we know that when combined with other high stakes accountability mechanisms, such as terminal testing and league tables, teaching and learning is fatally undermined. Freedom and innovation in the profession near disappears. Ultimately, these assessment and accountability regimes drive the action that schools and their staff take. Before finalising a skills strategy, proper consideration should be given to the importance of a system that measures learning rather than ticks boxes.

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<sup>6</sup> Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, *Summary, Implications and Recommendations*, 2009, p3

## Funding issues

ATL has responded separately to the parallel consultation, *A Simplified Further Education and Skills Funding System and Methodology*.

Despite being published at the same time, there is a serious risk that whatever emerges from the two consultation papers does not gel. The skills strategy presents a world of opportunity and benefit to all, whilst the funding proposals unpick that vision and take away opportunity. There is an inherent problem in seeking investment in skills for jobs that are about to be lost. We do not believe that teaching skills to power the private sector will be enough, nor do we believe that that can possibly appeal to, and engage, all young people. The government's approach to public finances is very clear. We hope that when the economic argument for skills is made to the Treasury that education is not left behind.

## Conclusion

We believe that it is essential for the skills strategy that it must look backwards and be consistent with a high quality education for all ages as well as focusing on older learners and employers. We are therefore pleased with the minister's comments that learning should be seen as a 'single whole' in the consultation paper but argue that the strategy must be much stronger in realising this vision.

The government should be wary of stating that colleges 'must focus on delivering for learners **and employers**' (our emphasis) and considering employers 'their customer'. This language of the market misjudges why many people enter the education sector. Yes, teachers and lecturers want the best for their students and very often this will mean entering employment, but the idea that they are there to serve employers will be alien, offensive even, to some who have dedicated their career to learning – be that developing young people, giving adults a 'second chance' education, or adapting to the multitude of other people who enter further education. Others may be more comfortable with serving employers, and others may have a passion for inspiring learners to enter an industry, but it is suggested that the bold language of the consultation paper needs probing and nuancing.

To ATL, this seems characteristic of a 'pre-strategy' which, despite some good intentions, fails to engage properly in the concept of skills being an educational, and not just economic, matter.