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**LEARNERS IN THE ENGLISH LEARNING AND SKILLS SECTOR:
THE IMPLICATIONS OF HALF-RIGHT POLICY ASSUMPTIONS**

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Notes on Contributors

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Abstract

The English Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) contains a highly diverse range of learners and covers all aspects of post-16 learning with the exception of higher education. In the research¹ on which this paper is based we are concerned with the effects of policy on three types of learners – unemployed adults attempting to improve their basic skills in community learning settings, younger learners on Level 1 and 2 courses in further education colleges and employees in basic skills provision in the workplace. What is distinctive about all three groups is that they have historically failed in, or been failed by, compulsory education. What is interesting is that they are constructed as ‘problem learners’ in learning and skills sector policy documents. We use data from 194 learner interviews, conducted during 2004/5, in 24 learning sites in London and the North East of England, to argue that government policy assumptions about these learners may only be ‘half right’. We argue that such assumptions might be leading to half-right policy based on incomplete understandings or surface views of learner needs that are more politically constructed than real. We suggest that policy-makers should focus more on systemic problems in the learning and skills sector and less on problematising groups of learners.

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The construction of learners in government policy texts: the case of the English learning and skills sector

One way of examining the English Government's view of post-compulsory learners is to analyse its policy documents. While we recognise that this form of analysis provides a partial perspective, policy documents are the major publicly available information on policy and, since they are constructed by a wide-range of policy makers – ministers, civil servants, policy consultants, members of relevant national agencies and political advisers – they broadly represent the views of those crafting and monitoring policy at the national level. Our analysis of seven major policy statements concerning post-compulsory learners published under the Labour Government between 1997 and 2005 - *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998), *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001) and its update (DfES, 2003), *Success for All* (DfEE, 2002), *14-19 Education and Skills* (DfES, 2005), the National Skills Strategy, *21st Century Skills: realising our potential* (DfES 2003 *et al.*) and its successor, *Skills: getting on in business, getting on in work* (DfES *et al.*, 2005) – reveals an increasing focus on 'problem groups'.

In *The Learning Age*, New Labour's first policy document on lifelong learning, the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, set out a broad vision of the role of learning in society.

“As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship.” (DfEE, 1998: 7)

The comprehensiveness of this vision is important, both in terms of the scope of learning and who is involved. In this document, learning has many purposes, is both formal and informal and, most notably, inclusive. This Green Paper was followed by a series of policy documents focused on the needs of particular groups of learners – adults with low levels of basic skills (DfEE, 2001 and DfES, 2003), those in further education (DfEE, 2002), 14-19 year olds (DfES, 2005) and adults in or seeking to enter the labour market (DfES et al., 2003 and 2005). This segmenting of learners in policy documents can be viewed in at least two ways. On the one hand, it might be seen as a practical elaboration of a lifelong learning policy designed to meet the needs of different categories of learners and particularly of the most disadvantaged. On the other, it might be interpreted as a narrowing of the vision of learning and learners, where some lifelong learners are ‘normal’ and others are deemed a ‘problem’. A closer examination of these policy texts reveals a number of policy assumptions about learners, their identities and their engagement with learning.

Skills for Life policy focuses on adults with basic skills needs and was a response to the Moser Report *A Fresh Start* (Moser, 1999). In the 2001 version of *Skills for Life*, learners are always seen as ‘them’ and not ‘us’. They are viewed with sympathy, on the grounds that they risk being cut off from “*the advantages of a world increasingly linked through information and technology*” (Blunkett, 2001:1) they are taken to “*have stressful lives*” (DfEE, 2001:8) and “*pressing personal and social problems*” (p. 17) which need to be addressed before they can participate in learning. Note how this apparent sympathy is accompanied by the implication that adults with basic skills needs are a drain on the economy and on society. This “*has disastrous consequences for the individuals concerned, weakens the country’s ability to compete in the global economy and places a huge burden on society*” (p. 6). *Skills for Life* (2001) presents a highly dysfunctional

picture of learners with basic skills needs and goes as far as to suggest that some adults suffer from *“inertia and fatalism”* (p. 7) and that *“there is evidence that some unemployed adults still have a deep-seated reluctance to address their literacy and numeracy skills needs”* (p. 16). Another implicit assumption here is that these learners should share the Government’s economic analysis and shoulder the *“responsibility to improve their employability to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them”* (p. 16). The government also proposed a requirement in two pilot areas that *“those unemployed people with literacy and numeracy deficiencies must address their needs. If they fail to do so they risk losing benefits.”* (p. 16). While the 2003 version of *Skills for Life* is less negative about adults with literacy and numeracy skills needs, there is still a stress on the role of education in preparing learners for work and on the cost of this ‘problem’ group to *“British business”*, in which *“Poor literacy, language and numeracy skills are estimated to cost the country well in excess of £10 billion a year”* (Clarke 2003:3).

The Skills Strategy (DfES *et al.* 2003) and the subsequent Skills White Paper (DfES *et al.*, 2005), on the other hand, appear to take a broader view of adult learning. Nevertheless, they continue to take a predominantly human capital perspective and the latter apportion blame to individuals with low levels of skills for making *“it harder for employers to introduce the innovations, new products and new working methods that feed improvements in productivity”* (p. 6). The White Paper recognises that adult motivation is diverse - *“many are looking for a better job and a better standard of living”* (p.6) but that learning also provides *“a rich source of interest, pleasure and personal fulfilment”* (p. 17). There is also a recognition of two key factors unrelated to the learner that may impede participation - complexity of provision, providers and support programmes; and lack of full commitment to training by employers.

The two major documents focused primarily on younger learners and further education – *14-19 Education and Skills* and *Success for All* – on the surface at least, expect all 14-19 year olds to be participants in some form of education and training. Those who are not participating are seen as ‘drop-outs’ and as a problem - a view driven by international comparative statistics (e.g. OECD, 2005). Both policy texts present a picture of learners as ‘customers’ who are motivated by and able to exercise choice. In particular, “*vocational opportunities, including different styles and places of learning*” are seen to be important because they “*will motivate many*” (DfES *et al.*, 2005 p. 7). ‘Academic’ and ‘vocational’ learners and academic and vocational learning are presented as being fundamentally different and this acts as justification for the retention of GCSE and A Levels (academic qualifications) and the perpetuation of a separate vocational route with specialised diplomas to meet the needs of learners who are seen as different.

Our observation at this stage is that following *The Learning Age*, with its broad view of learners and learner motivation, successive policy documents have employed narrower and more politically nuanced constructs of learner identity, justifying policy by stressing human capital, while underplaying the role of social capital and the wider benefits of learning. They use deficit images of certain groups of learners, while idealising the power of motivation, agency and choice within an education and training ‘quasi-market’. Part of the explanation for this approach to learners within policy documents may be that policy-makers rely predominantly on quantitative research, which they hope will produce ‘killer facts’ for short-term policy-making, rather than grappling with the subtleties often unearthed by qualitative research². It may also signal a political reluctance to tackle two of the deep-seated problems within English post-compulsory education and training – a

² This point is well made by Zoe Fowler (2004) in her PhD thesis which examines the way that the *Skills for Life* strategy was developed.

divided qualifications system and a lack of deep employer engagement with education and training (Hodgson & Spours, 2003).

The main point here is that while a politically constructed view of the learner may not be entirely wrong, it is at best partial and may tend towards the formulation of half-right policy. In the next section of this paper, we discuss emerging qualitative evidence about learners and their motivation from interviews with the three groups of learners, described in more detail below, talking about their experience of teaching, learning, assessment and inclusion in the LSS.

The learners' views of teaching and learning

The learners in our project within the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme, "The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector", fall into three groups based in 24 learning sites in London and the North East:

- adult learners on day-time basic skills provision in adult and community learning (ACL) settings (76 learners);
- younger learners, predominantly aged 16-21, on Level 1 and Level 2 courses in further education colleges (48 learners - 24 on Level 1 Health and Social

Care/Childcare courses, 18 on Level 2 Business Studies and 6 on a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in painting and decorating);

- learners in employment on NVQ or adult basic skills provision in or related to their place of work (70 learners).

The initial findings discussed in this paper represent work in progress and are based on two sets of interviews carried out during 2004-5 in each of the learning sites and a third set in FE. The interviews were, in the main, conducted on an individual basis. Learners were chosen either as representative of those studying in a particular site or, in some smaller work-based and adult and community learning settings, constituted the whole learner group. While our study cannot be claimed to be longitudinal, we have re-interviewed the majority of the FE learners in order to ask questions about retention, attainment and progression. A further limitation of this study is that we did not interview those not participating in learning because our focus is on learners' views of teaching and learning. We recognise too that this form of evidence has to be seen alongside the perspectives of other stakeholders in the learning and skills sector although, as the Government itself increasingly recognises (e.g. DfES, 2006), the views of learners are an important factor in policy making in education and training.

The ACL learners

Most of the 76 ACL learners we interviewed were female and over 30 years of age. Most specifically mentioned their lack of education and their disrupted or, in some cases, extremely negative experiences of compulsory education. For almost all, school was

associated with humiliation, social isolation, a sense of the pace being too fast and not being able to keep up. A minority of learners had undertaken post-school study prior to enrolling on an adult basic skills programme, but the majority had no or very few formal qualifications. There were one or two notable exceptions (e.g. one ethnic minority learner had a degree from India and another learner was nearing the end of a degree course).

About half the learners we interviewed stated that they were unemployed, with a higher proportion of those from the North East describing themselves in this category, as might be expected from national labour market figures. Those learners who were employed tended to have low paid and/or part-time work. A much larger proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) learners was found among our London interviewees than in the North East sample. A sizeable number of learners mentioned that they felt socially isolated for a number of different personal reasons including their educational, medical, social, marital status, sexual orientation or geographical position. For many, their centre or class was seen as a safe haven where they did not feel threatened and were accepted by both tutors and fellow learners in a way that they were not in the 'outside world':

"I come here even if I'm down in the dumps, cos it's uplifting. It's better than medication." (EL4/1)

The importance of a safe and supportive learning environment echoes the findings of other studies related to ACL learners (e.g. Hannon *et al.*, 2003; Bird & Ackerman, 2005). On the other hand, and in the North East in particular, a small minority of learners also

commented on the strength of their family networks and stated that they had been prompted by a member of their family to attend classes.

The majority of learners (61) interviewed were doing literacy/ESOL, with 17 studying numeracy and six ICT. More of the learners we spoke to were on Entry Level than on Level 1 and Level 2 courses. Most attended classes for four or fewer hours per week, with only one studying 12 hours and the rest usually undertaking between six and eight hours of study. A minority of learners mentioned homework or additional independent study outside the classroom.

The most commonly cited reason interviewees gave for enrolling in adult basic education courses (51/76) was to gain more confidence in using everyday English (mainly reading and writing but in some cases speaking), mathematics and ICT. This reflects the findings of a significant number of studies of adult learners (e.g. Crowther & Tett, 1997; Brooks *et al.*, 2001, Eldred, 2002). Most learners saw this as an end in its own right:

“I’m not aiming to get a job out of this course. I’m just doing this for me.” (IL6/2)

However, some also saw studying as a step to a more independent and fulfilling life, to further study and to employment:

“I want to be confident in reading and writing. I want to be able to do the nursing course.” (JL8/2)

The second most frequently mentioned reason for attending adult basic skills classes was employment, but most of the learners who gave this response realised that the type

of course they were currently pursuing was not going to lead directly into employment (and in many cases this was not their first priority). Employment was, for most of them, a longer-term aspiration. Often a significant life event (birth, death, redundancy) was given as the reason why learners started attending adult basic skills classes. This finding is echoed in larger surveys of adult learners (e.g. Sargant & Aldridge, 2002). Fourteen learners, for example, stated that they wanted to improve their own basic skills so that they could help their children with their education. Only a handful of learners specifically mentioned that they had enrolled to gain a qualification, although a small number had been registered for qualifications by their teachers and many were preparing to take them in the future. This is consistent with the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) 2002 survey of nearly 5,000 adults, which found that personal development and work-related reasons were the most common motivations for participating in learning (cited by 62% and 53% of respondents respectively), compared to just 24 per cent of respondents who were participating to gain a recognised qualification (Sargant & Aldridge, 2002:72-3).

Learner responses about their teaching and learning experiences were similar in the North East and London and some very clear messages emerge. The overall impression is that learning is a highly positive and enjoyable experience for the ACL learners and one from which they are gaining tangible educational and social benefits, including an increase in confidence and the courage to voice their own opinions.

The interviews suggest that four inter-related factors make for a positive learning experience - good relationships between tutors and learners; small classes with 1:1 attention and support; a relaxed and friendly learning environment; and learning being at the right pace for the learner. These four factors were mentioned by one or more

learners on each of the two visits to all eight of the learning sites. Praise for and gratitude to tutors and other support workers were mentioned by learners time and again. In only one interview was there any complaint about the amount of tutor time and support that was given. The large size of the class was seen by the learner as the main reason for this rather than any failing on the part of the tutor. The importance of the quality of the tutor/learner relationship is highlighted elsewhere in studies involving adult learners (e.g. Hannon *et al.*, 2003; Macleod *et al.*, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2005).

Assessment strategies are a key, if controversial, aspect of the *Skills for Life* strategy (Barton *et al.*, 2004), starting with initial and diagnostic assessment, using individual learning plans (ILPs) to monitor learner progress and culminating in the taking of the national literacy and/or numeracy tests at Levels 1 and 2. While these aspects of the *Skills for Life* strategy have preoccupied teachers and managers, our interviews suggest that learners seem to take them much more in their stride. Only 17 learners stated overtly that they had taken a test, although many more mentioned that they were working towards certification and appeared to be optimistic about their outcomes.

The FE learners

The FE learners on Level 1 and 2 courses in the four colleges in this study were mainly young (45 out of 48 were under 21), female (34 out of 48), white British (29 with 19 BME), with low previous qualifications in comparison with others of their age (37 had low GCSE grades, the remainder had Level 2 or higher qualifications). About half had some sort of financial support but only a minority (17) had any engagement with the labour market. Within this overall picture, there were marked differences between learner

backgrounds in the North East and London. The learners in the North East were overwhelmingly white, working-class young people, whereas in London the cohort was more mixed in terms of both age and ethnic group, due mainly to the impact of recent arrivals from several African countries. What is common to both London and the North East, however, is the widely recognised point about FE learners being disadvantaged (e.g. Hodkinson, 2004). An analysis of the personal background information on each of the 48 FE learners in our sample (e.g. previous attainment at school, eligibility for EMA or support from social services, refugee status) corroborated by the stories they told, suggest that most had difficult experiences in the past, at school or in wider life and had entered further education with fragile or even damaged learner identities.

Progression to a college course appeared complex compared with the easier transition of those on the academic route, where 'successful' learners are able to move directly into an A Level sixth form course following GCSEs. While learners we interviewed talked about deliberately opting for both the course and the college, the choices open to them were, nevertheless, constrained with other options, including school sixth form and possibly the workplace, having been closed off or not seen as viable. There were also less obvious constraints. While many learners had clear goals, as other studies have indicated, decisions were often culturally structured and gendered (Colley *et al.*, 2003) as the following quotation from a female Level 1 childcare student illustrates:

"I have always just wanted to work with children. My cousin has a baby and I have been helping her". (A1L1/2)

We also found evidence of high aspirations. Out of a total of 48 in the sample, no fewer than 40 learners stated that they wanted to progress to the next level of study and many

beyond this. Nearly half declared a desire to go to university to pursue professional courses although they recognised that it would be a long journey and that they would have to support themselves with work in the meantime:

“I want to go to Level 2 and then have a job and do part-time work to support myself. I’m planning to go further, to like university and do my degree” (C1L5/3)

The level of course appears to make little difference to aspirations. University aspirants (13 out of 48), who were spread across both Level 1 and Level 2 courses, were mostly black, female and concentrated in the London colleges.

Our sample of learners, reflecting national survey findings (LSC, 2004), enjoyed their courses at college because they felt they were learning and achieving; they appreciated the new type of learning in practical and vocational programmes as well as the strong social and group dimension. The positive contribution of FE teachers was also evident, with frequent comments about tutors having time to explain work, treating them as adults and boosting their confidence. Reflections on school experiences simply served to highlight the positive, new and different nature of college. For most, school was identified with a struggle to cope, perceived failure in examinations and associated problematic relationships with teachers:

“You get to learn more at college because at school they treat you like babies. All they do is shout, but if you are at college they don’t shout. They ask you to do something instead of telling you.” (A1L4/2)

Within this broadly positive experience of college it is possible, nevertheless, to detect differences according to the type of course and the degree of professional cohesion and

learner motivation. Learners could also spot the occasional weak teacher and some commented about members of their group who were not, in their view, taking their course seriously. We, like others (e.g. Stanton, 2004, Hodkinson, 2004), are finding evidence that the most successful courses in building positive learner identities in FE are 'strongly vocational' programmes with their clear purpose of preparing young people for a job. In our sample, this type of course attracted the most distinctive comments from interviewees, being seen as more demanding and theoretical than expected. One learner remarked, "*there's more to painting and decorating than you think*" (A2L5/2). Learners and teachers also appeared to be bound together by the common expectations of the accepted practices for the trade or profession. This, combined with the prospect of earning a wage, is a source of status and self-esteem for learners. By the same token, more general vocational courses (such as business studies) may not reproduce these motivating features.

What we found in FE were 'grateful learners', thankful to be participating in a course where they had a better chance of success than previously. Positive though learners were about the relevance of their course and the support of their teachers, this research, like other studies in this field (e.g. Watson, 2004), highlights problems of poor completion and progression rates, particularly at Level 1. Additional quantitative college-based data is required to build a more precise picture of learner progression in FE and we hope to provide this in future publications.

The WBL learners

The eight work-based learning sites in our research span a range of employers and occupational areas³, providing a very diverse set of learners from both the public and private sectors (e.g. from care workers to production line workers). Many, but not all, are in low paid employment, often with anti-social shift patterns, and all are engaged in education that has numeracy and/or literacy as part of its offer. In half of the sites, basic or key skills training was being provided by employers to help learners complete other qualifications that they were required to take. For the care workers, for example, this is the Level 2 NVQ in Care, which is a requirement of the Care Standards Act 2000 *and part of the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework and the Development Review Process* (DOH, 2004). Others were engaged in learning because they had freely chosen to take advantage of the learning opportunities on offer. Many made it clear that they were only able to do so because provision was located in or near their workplace.

The primary motivations for learning were bound up with the context in which it was taking place. In three sites, it was simply a case of being required to learn:

“We will not be allowed to work without the constant update” (OL1 /1)

³ The 8 work based learning sites in our research include learners who are:

- Care workers providing home care services for elderly and disabled people from specific ethnic minority communities;
- Employees in a bus garage (mainly drivers, but also including mechanics, cleaners and office workers);
- Laundry workers in an SME providing cleaning services for the hospitality and catering industry;
- Local authority employees, including refuse collectors, manual labourers, cleaners, street lighting engineers, gardeners and plasterers;
- Production line workers in a processed food factory;
- Younger learners on Apprenticeships, working in a doctor’s surgery, a recruitment agency, a training provider and a trade association library.

This did not mean that these learners lacked enthusiasm for learning. In the main they were very positive and grateful for the opportunity. This was particularly the case for the care workers, all of whom spoke English as their second language, and the ESOL learners more generally, for whom a major motivation was improving their spoken and written English to help them in all aspects of their lives:

“If you are living in this country, you’ve got to know everything about the language – you know, writing, reading and talking” (SL9/2)

The apprentices improving their key skills, meanwhile, had a very distinct motive, which was to get some recognised qualifications behind them after having, in their eyes, ‘failed’ at GCSE level.

A significant motivation that was evident across the sites was the desire to learn computing skills for both personal use and to improve employment prospects. In general, however, with the exception of the apprentices, career development was not as prominent an aim as might have been expected. Many of the learners simply wanted to ‘brush up’ on their literacy and numeracy, to make up for learning they had missed out on in the past. Others were taking up learning opportunities primarily for their own personal development, confidence and interest, like the factory worker who wanted *“to prove I could still think for myself instead of just being stuck on a line, chopping potatoes” (NL3/1)*. Another commonly cited reason for learning was the desire to be able to help children with school work.

Despite the diversity of the WBL learners, there was a striking consistency in how they described their experiences of teaching and learning, which broadly echoed those of the

ACL learners. Overall, the WBL learners were very positive about their learning experiences and repeatedly identified as important their relationship with tutors. Ananiadou *et al.* (2004) found similar views expressed by WBL learners in a recent pilot study. Tutors were praised for creating a relaxed and informal atmosphere, which was contrasted with the pressure that many learners associated with their prior educational experiences. A crucial element of making learning non-pressurised was the tutor's ability to create a safe space, in which it was possible for the learners to ask a question without it seeming "*like you were thick*" (OL1/2).

As a result of this more relaxed and informal experience of learning, some learners reported having got to know their work colleagues better, which had helped lead to improvements in the workplace as a whole. Maclachlan (2004) stressed the importance of this social dimension in work-based learning, particularly in relation to helping learners to overcome past negative experiences of learning.

The relationship between their learning and their job role was evident to all but three of the 70 WBL learners we interviewed, but this played out somewhat differently for different groups. The strongest connections between learning and work were made by the apprentices, who have to put together evidence from their daily work practice to satisfy the portfolio assessment requirements of their NVQ. This may also be related to their age and experience, as Hillage *et al.* (2004) found that younger learners on Employer Training Pilot-funded programmes were more likely to feel that they had learnt new skills that would help them to do their job better. Although the care workers were also working towards the completion of NVQ portfolios, improving their spoken and written English was of greater importance to many. Moreover, some of the care workers complained about the narrow focus of their NVQ - they were studying units that were

related to home care, but they were not being prepared for other care settings such as residential homes or hospitals, which they saw as restricting their future employment prospects. For most of the other WBL learners, their learning tended to be seen as less directly related to their daily working lives, although most could identify some benefits. There was also widespread recognition that improving literacy and numeracy provided advantages that extended beyond day-to-day work, with different individuals managing to get from the learning what was personally important to them.

The implications of 'half-right' policy constructs

These accounts, taken together with our analysis of key policy texts, lead us to suggest that government has created a political and economic construction both of lifelong learners and of their motivation for participation in education and training which is only 'half-right'.

In the case of *Skills for Life*, our research confirms the Government's assumption that there is a need for consistently high quality adult basic skills provision and that learners will respond positively to locally-based learning opportunities. It is clear from our learners (and their tutors) that both have benefited from policies that have brought about an extra focus on, and resources for, basic skills provision. This finding is consistent with a recent study undertaken by Barton *et al.* (2004). However, there is also an indication that the Government is half wrong about why learners are participating in ACL. It does not appear fully to recognise learners' motivations to improve aspects of their everyday lives and policy focuses too heavily on the economic benefits of learning.

Moreover, the direct link made in government policy documents between employment and social inclusion is not echoed by those interviewed for our study. The ACL learners here see employment as a longer-term goal. They are certainly talking about social inclusion but, in their view, this is not directly associated with employment. They appear to see social inclusion arising from a much broader set of factors related to their acceptance by society and the role they play within it as parents, neighbours and citizens. What many, if not all, of these learners are pointing to is the wider benefits of learning – confidence, independence, the experience of success, improved mental health, being able to play effective roles as parents, community members and so on. These have been highlighted by recent research as being highly important outcomes from learning (Schuller *et al.*, 2004). What they are saying is that it will take time for them to become independent enough to feel able to play the active social or labour market roles they and the Government would like them to, particularly on four hours of provision a week. Policy documents from both the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the body responsible for funding and planning provision in the learning and skills sector, and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) highlight the power of education to transform people's lives, but *“the **sustaining effect** of education on personal lives and the social fabric demands much fuller recognition...(it) underpins the maintenance of personal well-being and social cohesion.”* (Schuller *et al.* 2002:vii).

We speculate that government policy does not stress the wider benefits of learning because this type of outcome does not easily lend itself to the type of quantitative measurements normally used to justify public spending and might deflect from the economically-driven focus on Level 2 qualifications associated with employability.

An effect of this half-right view of learner motivation has been to confuse adult basic skills providers and learners about whom and what type of provision can be funded, and what counts towards performance targets. This has led to a concern among tutors and managers about the sustainability of courses for learners below Level 2, who are not progressing quickly through levels of provision (see also Hannon *et al.*, 2003; Barton *et al.*, 2004; Kingston, 2005). While it can be argued that the Government is right to emphasise progression, so that ACL learners do not simply 'languish' at the same level in basic skills classes for years, our research suggests that these learners' needs are so great and varied that they require more time and support than policy currently allows. Moreover, a focus simply on outcomes in terms of qualifications also denies the importance of all the other softer but vital outcomes that our learners and learners in other studies repeatedly mention (e.g. Eldred, 2002; Hannon *et al.*, 2003; Barton *et al.*, 2005; Bird & Ackerman, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2005). The main consequence of this half-right policy construction of ACL learner motivation and need is that the most disadvantaged learners, who are often not able to achieve the qualifications required to draw down funding or fulfil performance targets, will once again be left behind. While there is funding for those learners working below the level of the national literacy and numeracy tests, it is limited and is likely to be further restricted in the future. A recent study undertaken by the NIACE suggests that this is precisely what is happening as government funding for adult learning is reduced to meet the mounting costs of education and training provision for younger learners (McGivney, 2005).

With regard to Level 1 and Level 2 learners in FE, the Government view that vocational learning is motivational, particularly for those learners who found the school system alienating, is largely borne out by the learners in our study. Policies designed to improve the quality of this type of vocational learning – the introduction of specialised diplomas -

and to provide financial support for learners to undertake it – Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) - are thus welcomed. The indigenous FE learners we have interviewed to date seek in FE a different experience from school,⁴ and enjoy practical authentic learning, preparation for working life and being treated like adults; many are also benefiting from receiving EMAs. In this respect, the Government construct of Level 1 and Level 2 learners also appears to have some validity. However, these learners have far more constrained choices than the Government assumes. It would not be correct to claim that they have ‘chosen’ FE and vocational courses out of a wide range of available possibilities. The low prior educational attainment of these Level 1 and Level 2 FE learners makes it difficult for them to participate in school sixth forms, in general education and even in the workplace, in many instances.

The Government idea of certain learners who are not deemed suitable for GCSE and A Levels and who require “*vocational opportunities, including different learning styles and places of learning*” (DfES, 2005:7) allows policymakers to avoid uncomfortable questions about the roots of alienation within the school system and the selective nature of current general qualifications. Moreover, there is an under-estimation by policymakers of the effects of GCSE ‘failure’ on learner identities and the cost of repairing these identities in FE. Policy appears to compound the problem facing these learners by expecting FE to act as the ‘zone of repair’ without adequate resources for concerted remediation. FE colleges are still funded less generously than schools sixth forms for exactly the same courses (Fletcher & Owen, 2005). The overall effects are that initial learner satisfaction with the new learning environment of FE is not always sustained throughout a course and a year’s remediation, particularly at Level 1, is often insufficient to secure effective

⁴ In the London sample, there are a number of learners who have been educated in African schools who do not have the same feeling of alienation from their previous schooling.

progression either to a higher level course or to the workplace (Watson, 2004, Hayward *et al.*, 2004).

The Government's view of learners in the workplace again reflects a half-right policy construct of their motivations and the conditions for their effective participation. On the one hand, the most recent policy document in this area, the Skills White Paper, recognises a wide range of learner motivations – improving skills to meet national occupational standards, gaining job progression and promotion within the workplace, changing jobs in a flexible labour market and acquiring skills for everyday life and to move out of the 'low pay trap' – of which the learners in our study also speak. On the other hand, this more diverse policy conception of learner motivation does not fully appreciate the difficulties of learners pursuing these aims without full employer support. In addition, the narrow nature of NVQ qualifications does not encourage the development of wider skills for life and there is a lack of a progressive career structure and reward for improving one's qualifications in many low-skilled areas (Keep 2004). The Government does recognise some of the difficulties facing low-skilled learners in the workplace, hence the introduction of Employer Training Pilots and the funding of Union Learning Representatives – two initiatives that have been very effective in motivating employees to participate in learning (York Consulting, 2002; Thomas *et al.*, 2005).

However worthwhile these measures might also be, the Government remains unwilling to support the more widespread implementation of 'licence to practise' (i.e. the requirement for employees to gain certain qualification levels before they are able to work in a particular sector) as a framework for lifelong learning and social partnership in the workplace. Where 'licence to practise' has been introduced, as in the case of the care sector as a result of the Care Standards Act 2000 and the *NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework and the Development Review Process* (DOH, 2004), the evidence

from our research suggests that there is considerable stimulus for both employers to support, and employees to undertake, learning in the workplace. The absence of such a framework means that there are often tensions between the demands of the workplace/employer (which always come first) and the needs of the learner/employee (which take second place); funding for learning is not always sustained and workplaces do not necessarily either reward the acquisition of skills or offer learners the opportunities to practise their newly gained skills. Health care employees in one of our sites, for example, were being given training which required them to undertake tasks in a range of care settings, but their conditions of employment restricted them to domiciliary work. The overall effect of a half-right policy construct is to idealise the power of the individual to carry through her/his learning in the workplace without full employer support. Laudable attempts such as *The Employer Toolkit* (DfES, 2004), which has been explicitly designed to engage employers in meeting the basic skills needs of their workforce, are no substitute for stronger regulation of the labour market. This type of voluntarism, which depends on employer goodwill and learner resourcefulness, is unlikely to lead to the reproduction of good practice consistently across workplaces or to sustainable learner development in all working environments.

It is important to recognise that from our evidence to date, half-right policy constructs of learners have not resulted in learner dissatisfaction with provision. In their enthusiasm for the learning opportunities they have experienced, our learners reflect very much the responses of the *National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/3* (LSC, 2004) and the national evaluation of the Employer Training Pilots (Hillage *et al.*, 2004). However, it may be the case that what we are witnessing here are 'grateful' learners, thankful to have more relevant and personalised provision, compared with their earlier less positive experience of schooling. It is possible that half-right policy constructs facilitate initial

participation in education and training, but cannot reproduce the conditions for sustainable learner development and progression.

Our research suggests that by narrowing learner motivations and idealising the power of learner agency, policy-makers under-estimate the negative effects associated with poor experiences of schooling and the time and support required of colleges, adult and community settings and workplaces to remediate these. Furthermore, they downplay the central role of the teacher/learner relationship in repairing learner identity. By problematising learners rather than the system, policy-makers avoid having fully to confront wider reform of secondary schooling; the selective qualifications system; the lack of involvement by employers in the education system; and the effects of a flexible labour market on participation in and motivation towards education and training. In our view, this wider reform is essential in order to build the conditions for more sustained participation, achievement and progression in learning to meet the diverse needs of lifelong learners and of employers.

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